

BETHESDA

BARBARA ELBON

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BETHESDA

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BY

BARBARA ELBON

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“Thou art my dream come true, and thou my dream,
Thou art what I would be, yet only seem ;
Thou art my heaven and my hell ;
Thou art my ever-living judgment-day.”

R. W. GILDER.

CHAPTER I.

"A face at once young, grand, and beautiful, where, if there is any melancholy, it is no feeble passivity, but enters into the foreshadowed capabilities of heroism."—GEORGE ELIOT.

BETWEEN Genoa and Florence is one of the most beautiful bits of the far-famed Cornice Road. On leaving the superb city the railway winds through orange and pomegranate groves, along oleander hedges, across narrow valleys made by hills which are clothed in olive orchards and crowned by Italian pines. It rises and falls obedient to the dictates of nature, yielding to obstructions only to conquer them, and now runs by the foaming Mediterranean, and again crosses a sea-rent chasm at a dizzy altitude. High crags, pedestals for single trees, rise abruptly from the waves that dash against their base; while on some of the larger rocks castles are built, or gray-walled villages, with a bit of beach beneath where fishing-boats lie in deep colouring of red and brown. The people run out in peasant array at the sound of the engine-bell, and, on one of the first winter days in 187—, the inhabitants of the rocky fastnesses caught a glimpse of a girl's face which seemed a human type akin to that of the landscape. It was not lacking in strength, but showed a pre-eminent refinement, which was full of passionate sensitiveness. The features were finely cut, and the complexion of a clear pallor, which made more forceful the long eyebrows slightly curving over large hazel eyes, and the golden-brown hair which was drawn simply away from a forehead capable of much serenity. In animation the changes of warm sunshine and soft shadow which characterised the view were here also; but in repose a sadness of expression settled upon the face, often seen in countenances denoting at once youth and earnestness. To-day, however, there was added an anxiety which the beauty of the view could not dissipate.

This was her twentieth birthday, and standing by the carriage window she looked off over the water to the far horizon, trying in vain to pierce its pearly veil, as if thus she might see the future. She had endeavoured to throw aside the vague feeling which weighed upon her, but no effort could overcome an oppressive dread, the effects of which troubled her aunt, who was watching her, Mrs. Trescott, the only other occupant of the carriage.

"Come here, Beth, and tell me what is the matter," she said at last. "Must birthday thoughts be so very melancholy? I wanted you to have a happy day, and you said nothing would gratify you so much as reaching Florence. Did you overtax your strength? Are you too tired, dear?"

The last sentence was added with increased anxiety in noticing the jasmine pallor and an unwonted weariness in the eyes Beth turned towards her.

"No, indeed, dear auntie," answered the girl, seating herself, however. "I am not more tired than I naturally must be after the long journey."

"Well, then, what is it, pet? The day is perfect, the views lovely, and you are on your way to the place where you say you have longed to be all the year: our own rooms at Florence. Don't have secrets from me, dear; why should your birthday be sad?"

"Not sad, auntie; only——" She moved so as to turn her face away before she continued. "It is very foolish of me, I know, but I can't remember how many years it is that I have felt the decade opening to-day was to be of great importance to me. I am sure some decisive test of character will come soon, which I fear, I greatly fear, I may not bear worthily."

Her voice stopped suddenly. There had been an unusual quiver of feeling in it from the first, which now increased so as to make speech dangerous. She was not given to superstitious fancies, but this had grown in her until it seemed to cast a long shadow over the coming years.

Mrs. Trescott was of a much less reasonable temperament than her niece, but she was also prone to think that the "feelings" of others were not to be relied upon, whatever her own might be; so she only thought, "The child is too tired," and said in a cheery tone:

"Why, what a foolish girl! You are always lecturing me

for putting faith in such nonsense, and here you are twice as silly, I'm sure. Besides, I haven't had the training of you for nothing. If you did have a 'test,' you would come out of it with flying colours. I am not afraid."

"But that only makes me more so," answered the girl, with increased earnestness. "You have too much confidence in me, auntie; I have never done anything to deserve it. Don't you see—— How can you tell what will be my temptations, or how I will resist them? No one can. And so—— Well, it is like a cloud between me and the sun."

"Leave it to the sun to dissipate, Dolly. Look out, and enjoy yourself. It does no good to brood over a thing in this fashion."

"Probably not," said the girl, somewhat drearily. She was half disappointed in her aunt's careless answers. The presentiment weighed too heavily for her not to desire a firm support, in recognition of a possible failure, and helpful words to reinforce her already unnerved strength. But Mrs. Trescott did not understand the inner workings of this girl's mind, which she thought she knew through and through. She saw Beth's rare tears were near the surface, however, and poured out a glass of sherry, saying:

"Here, you will find this much more palatable than swallowing unshed tears; and as to crying—— Why, if you cry to-day, it would be a dreadful reproach to me, for I should know you were just worn out, and that I ought not to have done as you teased me to,—which I always do, you little witch!"

The stimulant did Beth good, and the confessing of her trouble also. It looked sillier now that it had been spoken, and her aunt left her no time to brood, but began to talk of other things.

"Don't you wish you knew what I am going to give you to-day?" she asked presently. "You couldn't have lovelier associations than these. Just look there!"

The train was moving with exceeding care across a great chasm, bridged by a natural arch, hundreds of feet above the sea. As Beth leaned out she could see nothing except the perpendicular cliffs and the leaping, restless waves far below.

It was a dizzy sight and fascinating, as such sights often are. The girl was tired and excited. She felt an intense

desire to fall through the air, and touch the water beneath. The longing took her breath quite away. She gave a little gasp, and her head sank on the window-sill. Then, through the rush in her ears and the sound of the quickening train, she heard her aunt's voice, as from a distance, in alarmed accents.

"Beth! Beth! be careful! What is the matter?"

"Nothing," she contrived to say after a moment. "Just let me be quiet." Then, presently: "I suppose I was dizzy. But it was a strange feeling."

"Change seats with me," said Mrs. Trescott emphatically. "You must not look out of the window. Here is your present instead."

"A ring? Oh, it is beautiful. I never saw one like it."

"There isn't such another in all the world!" exclaimed Mrs. Trescott. "We tired ourselves to death hunting for something, and this, at last, just pleased me. Monsieur d'Isten discovered it at a queer place way down in the city, he said. He brought it for me to see, and I took it without more ado. I think it is just perfect."

"I like it," said Beth, in a tone of thorough satisfaction. "It is becoming, too; but look inside." There were a number of Arabic characters clearly engraved. "Can you read it? Try."

After turning it around several times, Beth deciphered: "Let not grass grow on the path of love—or friendship." "The same word means both, I believe."

"Brava! You hardly need such an admonition, however. I now—— Well, my way is best after all. When a friendship once commences to languish, let it go. No amount of galvanism will make it lifelike. Still, one might afford to pull up a weed now and then in the pathway, I daresay. The best way, though, is to travel it often and crush the seeds down."

"We won't let any seeds have a chance to sprout in our path, will we, auntie?" said Beth fondly. "But how did you know what it was? Have you been studying Arabic too?"

"Oh, my dear! imagine me! No. M. d'Isten translated it for me. He was born in Algeria, you know."

"I didn't know it."

"Yes, he is the son of the Marquis de F——, lieutenant-general of the forces there."

"Indeed?" exclaimed Beth, in pleased surprise. "Why, the Marquis was the one who sent us our escort, and was so very kind to us, although we missed our opportunity of seeing him. He is a man of whom one hears nothing but praise. Can M. d'Isten be his son?"

"I don't see why you should be so very much astonished. That is the precise man I should have said would be René d'Isten's father."

There was a slight *hauteur* in her manner which Beth did not notice at the moment.

"I thought you had quarrelled," she said, "and that you did not like him so well as at first."

"I don't. He has disappointed me." A shadow crossed Mrs. Trescott's face as she spoke; a shadow of mingled pride, offence, and repression. She was exercising unusual self-control.

"So he is an Algerene," said Beth, with interest. "And the wife of the Marquis, was she a native or French?"

"She was an *Orientale*, a Christian of the open Bible, as they call it. Her son always speaks of her with much reverence."

"And of his father too, I'm sure."

"He is proud of him, but I fancy the Marquis is a cold man."

"Perhaps, but every one admires him," exclaimed Beth eagerly. "He has, they say, the keenest sensitiveness to honour. A true Bayard."

"Hum!" was the sceptical comment of Mrs. Trescott.

"His son is not like him in that, then?"

"I thought so—once, but that passed, as all such ideas do."

She spoke bitterly, but Beth, used to frank confidence between them, asked:

"What happened? You never told me the cause of the trouble."

"I never shall, probably," was the unexpected rebuff.

"He failed in respect to me. That is enough for my niece to know."

Beth sat a moment dumb with surprise. "Then you do not expect to meet him again, I suppose," she said presently, and Mrs. Trescott answered, with assumed carelessness:

"Oh, yes; we may meet. I don't know that I should be angry with him now; only, we are not friends."

"A fine bit of sarcasm," thought the girl, but she exclaimed frankly :

"Well, I hope we won't meet!"

"Why not?" retorted Mrs. Trescott sharply.

"I never fancied him from what you yourself told me of him when you liked him best," said Beth, with some spirit. "I tried to hold myself neutral until I should see him as long as he was your friend; yet when I heard that I should not have to know him it was a relief."

Mrs. Trescott looked at her with contradictory meanings in her face.

"Yet you admire his father so much!" she said at last.

"They are very different apparently." After a pause the girl added in a firm tone: "Didn't you say M. d'Isten was married?"

"Yes."

"Have you met his wife?"

"No; she does not live in Paris."

"And does he live there all the year?"

"As far as I know. But you needn't cross-question me any further. It is a disagreeable subject. You haven't thanked me for your ring yet."

"Ah," said her niece, with a smile like a sunbeam, "it is what I most desired."

She took her aunt's hand, and kissed her wrist above the glove. All the constraint in Mrs. Trescott's manner vanished.

"That is pretty thanks, dear. I am glad you have the ring. It seemed to belong to you from the first."

It was a heavy hoop of yellow gold, with a leaf lying on it, against which was a ruby rose with a diamond in its heart.

"I wonder who it was made for?" mused the girl, turning it from side to side so that the gems should catch the light. "Perhaps for some sultana who wore it in the harem, where she was for ever queen. Perhaps for some Christian maiden, whose lover gave her this as a betrothal ring; that diamond might be the virgin who was enwrapped in the folds of his heart. Or perhaps—the gem might be a tear, too—it was the symbol of a love which should last through the circle of eternity, even though grief lay in its midst."

She looked up smiling, a little gravely.

"You romantic child!" laughed Mrs. Trescott. "That

last supposition would only be thought of by one as foolish as you. But dream away as much as you like, so long as you don't dream anything sad. I can't have my present bring you sorrow even in fancy, sweet."

"No danger. It is too lovely for that."

The rest of the journey passed in comparative silence. Mrs. Trescott was reading the last crowned French novel; Beth was thinking,—rather dreaming. Her mind wandered back to the broken home in Massachusetts; to the sister who was her one youthful, earnest companion; to the aunt and uncle with whom this sister lived; while she and the aunt who had brought her up wandered over the face of the earth, and found only occasional oases of rest, as they would now find a few months' quiet in Florence.

And meanwhile under all her musings lay the dull, haunted feeling which, ghost-like, vanished when she tried to find its substance, and, without words, made her understand that the future was in its power; she could not escape it. Her mental horizon reminded her of the desert she had so lately traversed. Long sable dunes sweeping away, with no boundary but the sky; waves of sand, changing under the wind, to break only into other tawny waves, and, while changing, ever the same.

The desert had made a great impression upon her. Its silence, its weird immensity, its burning suns and wondrous stars, had all wrought their influence upon her. She had come to understand why the Arabs were fatalists there; would this shadowy future teach her to be one?

She was roused from her reveries by the sight of the Flower City beneath them. They had crossed the last pass of the Apennines, and were striking down into the valley. As Beth saw the town which she dearly loved, where many happy hours had been spent, and friends would soon know of their unexpected arrival, she regained something of her usual spirits; and her eyes lost all their sadness as the well-known buildings came near, the Lily Tower and the grand cathedral conspicuous above the closely-packed houses.

"Isn't it the loveliest city in the world?" she exclaimed. "See! there is the river, and our house. I can even catch the reflection of the windows! It's like coming home; it is our heart's home, isn't it, auntie?"

"How would you like to live here always?" asked Mrs.

Trescott, looking up at the girl, as she stood with her hands clasped through the door-strap, her slender figure swaying pliantly. "Margaret could come over, and we all live here together. You don't care for America much."

"But I do care for persons there. Margaret never could leave Aunt Agatha; and, besides, she could not be happy here. They think we lead aimless lives."

"I am sure, with your music, and now your writing, you do more than they do! And you could not be here at all, but for me. However, I was not serious. Of course, America is the place to live in."

"But we have this winter, at least, in dear Florence!" exclaimed Beth. "Aren't you glad?"

"Yes, I like Italy. I hope it may be a very happy year to you," she added tenderly. "We have much to be thankful for; you were so ill a year ago, and now you are almost well again."

"Quite well, auntie," corrected Beth. "You know we are going to forget I am not a Samson, and try gaiety fearlessly. But, dear," and her voice grew sweet and grave, "most of all, I want to make you happy. You have been so good to me!"

Mabel Trescott's answer was a warm pressure of Beth's hand, but nothing more was said, for the train now puffed slowly into the station.

A few moments later they were rolling over the clean streets, Beth recognising each landmark with affectionate pride, and admiring anew the palaces which raise themselves, "by three long-drawn breaths," higher than any houses in Europe. In one of these was the suite they had made into a home. The windows looked out in front between stately houses, on to the Arno, and olive-clothed hills beyond, now crimsoned by the setting sun. On the other side the apartment opened into a half-wild garden, where the ilex alleys and measured parterres were overgrown with ivy and clambering roses.

As the delighted servants rushed out through the medieval gateway to kiss the hands of their *care signore*, Beth felt a glow of pleasure which warmed her heart. She ran lightly up the marble staircase, and, greeting the *padrone* with a glad nod, went on ahead of him into the *sala*.

How familiar everything was! There was the same triangular fireplace in the corner, where wood was already burning;

the same confusion of tables and sofas, *etagères*, and easels; the same shadowy Rembrandts and glowing Titians; and the painted Aurora still floated among her substantial clouds on the high ceiling. Also—yes, surely—there was her favourite fragrance of tea-roses permeating the air.

“Who could have sent these?” she exclaimed, bending over a bowlful of the creamy beauties. The beaming *padrone* bowed profoundly in the doorway as he answered:

“We Tuscans have good memories, signorina mia.”

“You don’t mean you remembered my birthday?” she cried, her dark eyes shining. She gave the old man her hand; “*Mille grazie*, signore.”

“Ah, signora,” he said, lifting her fingers to his lips, “no one could forget your sweet patience last year. It does an old man’s heart good to see you well, and that you care for us still, although you have been far over the waters.”

“There is nothing like it there,” she answered, with a little decisive gesture. And then Mrs. Trescott coming in, and business usurping attentions, Beth slipped off alone into her rose boudoir.

Here, too, all was familiar, and doubly dear. By the fire was the *chaise longue*, on which she had passed days and weeks during the languor of convalescence. A buhl cabinet stood opposite the window, and above it hung an inspired sibyl, in the full light of the great window, whose curtains made all one end of the room a mass of snowy draperies.

Leaning against the casement, and looking out into the twilight garden, Beth said earnestly:

“I have conquered much in this room; I will trust I shall more.”

Not suffered, or endured, but conquered, was her thought.

A few hours later Mrs. Trescott had retired, and the moon had risen, and was sending a silver flood through one of the great arched windows into the *sala*. Presently Beth lifted the curtain of the little study, and came out into the dim room. She wanted space around her. She needed to breathe freely before she could rest.

The light from the half-shaded door made but a faint impression on the shadowy vastness of the apartment, but the effect of the moonlight on the indistinct masses of furniture and glimmering marbles pleased Beth’s mood. She was im-

pressionable, and the memory of this being the house where Dante's Beatrice used to live came back to her now with a thrill of delight.

She went and seated herself on the wide window-ledge in the full shower of moonbeams. With the pure outline of her uplifted face, and her sweeping white draperies, she might have been taken for the mystic maiden of whom she thought. The ring still glowed on her hand like a drop of blood, but she had forgotten it.

"What a glorious destiny it was to lead such a man through heaven!" she was saying to herself. "The highest a woman could have. No, there was Mary, she was blessed among women, and yet, how she suffered! But who would not bear the agony for the joy of giving food to hungry humanity? Nothing is too hard to undergo, if we let it only make us nobler."

She spoke bravely, half aloud. It was an answer to the fear that had been haunting her. She met it now fairly. It might do its worst; good would ensue.

Thus exorcised, the spirit left her, and her thoughts wandered to other things. The year had been a happy one, yet in many ways serious. A man had loved her, and she had liked him. She had tried to do more. Her aunt pleaded his cause: his mother also. But it is a trying situation for any man to attempt to be the ideal of an intelligent girl during the years when her ideas are constantly changing. Idealising men is the next step to idealising dolls. An enthusiastic girl can make an idol out of a stick, but she won't worship it unless she believes in it. This Beth had not been able to do. Her aunt's influence was all towards making a marriage on the basis of esteem and liking. Mrs. Randleth's (an Englishwoman) had, of course, been the same. Beth did like Clarence, but she never felt the indescribable repulsion from him so much as when she admired him most, and saw the most reason in her friends' urgings.

It wore upon her, delicate as she was from her long illness, and she accepted an invitation from Aunt Agatha, and went home suddenly, on a few months' visit, leaving Mrs. Trescott for a summer trip with friends.

It had all become clear to her there; how, she could not exactly say. Perhaps it was being in the truly conjugal atmosphere that Mr. and Mrs. Stanhope gave to their home. Perhaps it was the awakening of her national independence within her.

Whatever was the cause, Clarence was quietly made to understand that there was no hope of her yielding, and she returned to Europe fancy free.

But the new key which she had struck in touching American ideas and customs, after her long residence abroad,—if flitting can be so called,—and which had seemed harsh at the time, echoed, unconsciously to herself, through old associations now renewed. She found a difference in opinion between herself and her aunt which she had never noticed before. She discovered that the unprogressive actions and notions of the conservative old world were less sympathetic to her than they had been. Perhaps this grew more rapidly from the force of contrast, during her travels in Spain, where traditionary ideas are most blindly held, and Algeria, where ideas of any kind seem a thing of the forgotten past. Moreover, being separated from one who had been accustomed to unquestioning obedience from her, and who never hesitated with advice or commands, gave her an opportunity of developing independence which she needed.

Her sister Margaret, with her radical adhesion to her own principles and opinions, helped her too. She wished now she could be more with her sister. It was an influence which, though silent, was thousand-tongued. There was no one to rival her in Beth's heart. To her aunt she was devotedly attached, but her sister was closer, indeed thoroughly at one with her. As for lovers—— Well, Beth had often asserted, as many girls of high ideals do in this age, her conviction that she would never marry. Yet she was always, half consciously, expecting the demi-god who would rout her conviction, and prove that she knew nothing of what she said.

Meantime her heart slept, as did nature around her under the starry, purple sky. Presently the dawn would come; and what would the light awaken that now was wrapped in dewy silence? It was winter now; the plant was there, but no bud; what fruit, then, would ripen in the summer sunlight?

CHAPTER II.

"She sitteth in a silence of her own ;
Behind her, on the ground, a red rose lies ;
Her thinking brow is bent, nor doth arise
Her gaze from that shut book whose word unknown
Her firm hands hide from her."

R. W. GILDER.

It was a glorious day in early February. Already spring was making itself felt in the subtle excitant of the air, and showing itself in the crocuses and wild hyacinths. The trees were perforce letting fall the yellow leaves of last year, because of the swelling buds that came to replace them. There is no use exercising tenacity when the inner growth says—Past.

In the old garden behind celestial Beatrice's earthly home the grass was fresh and short, the roses were beginning to bud, the air was fragrant, and birds were wooing one another among the branches. Bethesda Hamilton, of course, was there in the heart of it all. She was devoted to the picturesque spot, with its cacti-topped walls, opening to let one see the river and hills and far-reaching valley. Often she would lie for hours on the sod looking and dreaming.

For the time it satisfied her. She could look at those far-away hills, and the time-toned towers, and the shimmering olive groves, until she seemed to feel what they felt, coming curiously near to nature. She could listen to the birds, and the children's voices, and the chimes of sacred bells, until they made a rhythm within her, to which every pulse beat musically, and each ruddy drop flowed in tune.

So there she was this morning, secluded and yet open to sky and air, when Mrs. Trescott spied her blue gown on the grass, and came out with a letter in her hand. Beth was immediately all animation. She sprang up and ran to meet her aunt.

"A letter for me?" she cried. "From Margaret?"

"From somebody you may yet like better," said Mabel.

"As if that could be! Oh, from Clarence!" Her voice fell with such a tone of disappointment that Mrs. Trescott laughed.

"He *would* be flattered!"

"Is this all?" asked Beth.

"Yes; the mail was evidently absorbed in bringing you that. I hope it is worth it."

She waited, strolling here and there, as if she expected Beth to read it, but the girl was not in the mood.

Presently Mabel disappeared again into the house, and Beth was left alone to her disturbed reverie. It was indeed disturbed. The restlessness and sweet pain of spring had come closer to her now. It was hardly sweet, it was so keen. She threw herself on the grass again, and pressed close to the earth to still this uneasiness—was it of craving or regret?

After a little she took out the letter and read it. It was a manly note; only a few earnest words from one who felt he had a right to assure her of his steadfast devotion since he claimed nothing in return; except, indeed, the encouragement her purity lent to every one, to try to make his life better worth living, as the memory of her was helping him to do.

It touched Beth deeply. She would have given much had she been able to return Clarence Randleth's affection. The delight she would give, the rest she would feel, appealed to her strongly. The lack of stability in the circumstances around her had grievously influenced her character. There was not a side on which her nature did not reach out for something to which she could vow and keep fidelity; and her outstretched arms found nothing—her hands closed only on empty air.

Meantime, within the convex mirror which was turned to the world on every side there grew a personality as surely, if silently, as crystals form in the still sea-caves. And this personality had a magnetism which no one understood, least of all, perhaps, herself. She hardly knew of its existence, except when something rose within her that flung aside all outward interference and asserted itself supreme, as had been the case in her final decision about this lover.

Instinct was strong within her to defend the inner being; it was an imperious instinct; she never could definitely belie it. Those who passed the glassy walls of her courteous reserve and were admitted into her friendship found themselves in a dim mystic city, where they hardly knew what were their own shadows and what the natural inhabitants. Forms of light and forms of darkness were there, and all freely to be known. But in the centre was a palace surrounded by a wide stream, which no one could either fathom or bridge. Here the being, who

frightened Beth herself at times, lived in solitude, working silently, feeling passionately. She would look forth at those who stood on the other side and dipped impotent feet into the deep waves, scrutinising them, expectant of the one who was to cross in triumph, and to whom she would gladly relinquish her sovereignty. But she was not to be deceived; and to all as yet, plead as Beth might, she turned an averted face.

"Beth! Girlie!" called Mrs. Trescott.

Beth looked up and saw her aunt in the window, and behind her a man's eager face. It was too eager for Beth not to be pleased, for each woman loves the true love in her lover, even if unrecognised. Yet she rose reluctantly. It was charming out, and she shrank from the thought of sitting under this artist's eyes, which had subtly changed of late, and held a light she now half liked, now wholly disliked, to meet. But it was all so unsubstantial that she could find no adequate reason for refusing to do what he pleaded for persistently, and which she knew he had now again come to press.

So she lingered in answering her aunt's summons, and broke off a spray of the new leaves and passed it over her hand again and again, hesitating to enter. Thus hesitating Signor Straora found her.

He was a fine-looking man, with a strong face and deferential manners. He approached Beth now, bowing profoundly.

"Ah, signore, you thought I was very dilatory? To tell the truth, I was afraid to go in."

"Thank you," he said gravely.

"Why does that please you?" she asked in surprise. "Do you like to be feared?"

"To-day it promises me much."

"What does it promise you?" Her eyes fell after a glance at his face. She began to guess.

"It promises me that you have forgiven whatever my offence may have been," he said eagerly, drawing a step nearer. "It promises me that you will not be obdurate; that I shall see you in my studio; that your kindness will intercede for me; that——"

"Perhaps, signore," said Beth demurely; "perhaps it promises too much. Let us go in."

The *sala* looked unusually attractive in its shadowy grace, coming from the noonday light, which had grown almost too intense. Mrs. Trescott was sewing in a recess, willing to leave

Beth and Signor Straora undisturbed. She was the most lenient of chaperones ; indeed, she tried to escape being one at all, she so detested the *rôle*.

But Beth intended to have all the protection she could. She seated herself close beside her aunt, and motioned Signor Straora to a chair not very near. She was determined to be unapproachable. Promises, indeed ! they were all the other way.

"Was it hot out?" said Mrs. Trescott carelessly, looking tropical enough with her warm colouring and dark curls against the bright window. She was a fair-skinned brunette, with eyes which sometimes go with this anomalous type, never seeming to be of the same colour twice, but varying from the luminous darkness of emotion to the light gray of indifference, or the sunny laughter of teasing moods ; at all times a surprise. Signor Straora thought he had never seen a finer contrast than between her and her niece.

"Too warm in February, auntie? It could not be for me even in summer, but——"

"There was too much nature around to entertain Monsieur l'artist, eh?" said Mabel in a teasing tone.

Beth rose a trifle abruptly. Her aunt ought to support her, she thought ; two against one was unfair.

"If I am a true artist nothing could please me so well as nature," Signor Straora said meanwhile, addressing himself entirely to Mabel. "A bit of garden like that in which I found the signorina would do for one of Raphael's backgrounds." He shaded his eyes and looked out into the brilliant atmosphere.

"Tell me," said Beth, approaching him, now that he was impersonally occupied, "what do you think of this engraving of Santa Anna from da Vinci?"

"It is an excellent engraving," replied the artist critically.

"You speak as if you did not like the subject."

"Nor do I. Can an artist expect to take a face, which is only clay modelled by character, and use the form without giving the soul's expression? In all Leonardo's paintings I see the woman who broke his heart and ruined his honour."

He laid the engraving aside with a slight gesture of dislike. Beth bent over it with new interest.

"Nay," she said eagerly, "I thought you artists held that forms are supreme ; that character cannot make a plain face beautiful, or a beautiful one ugly."

"Signora," said Straora, smiling, "you are giving artists credit for less discrimination than most men, and it is our boast that we have more. Give me a pure-hearted woman with no deformity but plainness, as you say, and I could produce you a Virgin that would not shock you. There would be nothing in her face which would be inharmonious with pure beauty. But a woman such as Monna Lisa—it is blasphemy."

Beth was smiling up at him with shining eyes. This met her ideal expectation; it was what she wished might be.

"Ah, signorina!" exclaimed the artist, suddenly fervent; "come but back to my studio, sit to me but twice more, and see what I will do!"

Before Beth could reply came a quick knock at the door, and Guinevere Conover, an English prima donna who was making a fine success in Florence, entered. She was a tall fair girl with golden hair of no artificial tint, but her eyebrows and lashes were dark, making the blue eyes an unexpected sight, and one which never fails to indicate a nature at combat with itself. She had become an ardent friend of Beth's during the winter, and had a cluster of tea-roses now in her hand as a tribute to her little queen.

"How could you come to see me when you are going to sing in the new opera to-night?" exclaimed Beth, with fond rebuke, as soon as the introductions were over.

"I couldn't stand it at home," answered Miss Conover in an undertone, going towards the study to lay aside her wraps. "I must not do anything to-day, and idleness just kills me. It gives me nerves, and fears, and all sorts of silly things, and I knew you would exorcise them. Ah, love!" she exclaimed abruptly, as the curtain fell behind them, "you are all my peace and my rest now. It's marvellous the effect you have on me. I feel it as soon as I come near. To-day I stood outside your door there, before I knocked, and just tried to feel you, as it were; but it was nothing to having you right here."

"You shall stay with me, then, as long as you like; all day if you choose," said Beth promptly. She knew the passionate woman had been thrown by an early disappointment on to the stage for work, and that now her whole devotion was given to her art except what—could it be?—was reserved for Bethesda. "If I can quiet you, you shall have me," she added tenderly.

"That is like you, sweet. Let me put this rose in your hair. It is too lovely for any other place. I remember when I first saw

you, dressed in sheer white, I thought you were like a tropical moonlight, so fair and clear, and yet with an undertone of passion in you which suggested exotic flowers, and palm trees, and——”

“And deserts!” interrupted Beth, turning away somewhat impatiently. “Forgive me, but I can’t bear to be talked about. I just hate myself to-day.”

“Why, what can be the matter, carissima?” With quick instinct she added presently: “Is it the painter?”

“Precisely!” exclaimed Beth. “I have been so stared at and studied by him that even when he says nothing I am conscious of myself and my poses. It’s miserable! I feel like hiding myself in a cavern. Instead,” she added, with an effort after her usual manner, “come in and talk to him. He is entertaining and appreciative; you will like one another.”

Signor Straora rose to meet them and to take his leave at the same time; but a word from Beth persuaded him to stay, and the conversation was immediately easy and fluent. Beth delighted in listening to the witty sallies and vivacious replies which passed between Signor Straora and Miss Conover, but after a little the latter grew restless. This was not what she needed; Beth’s presence did not exercise its charm with other persons intervening.

She rose, and, going to the piano, began turning over some music. When she could not have one, her instinct led her directly to the other.

“Sing us one little song, won’t you, Evra?” urged Mrs. Trescott.

“Oh, she ought not,” interposed Beth. But to such a nature as Guinevere’s danger lends piquancy. Besides, as she said, one song could not tire her.

She had soon chosen a simple minor air, with pathetic intervals and an appealing melody. It expressed the sorrow of a man who had laid his beloved in the grave, and had planted flowers at her head and feet—one dark and sombre, to tell his grief; and one white and candid, to recall her purity.

Music is said to be the voicing of the emotions, and surely it was so here. The rare voice touched its hearers, and made their innermost wishes speak. Mrs. Trescott was restless under a rankling memory; Beth thought how far better it would be to love, and lose, if need were; and for a moment Straora’s eyes rested on Beth’s drooping head, with the rose in

the warm coils, as a man might look at one who had the power to save him from sorrow bitterer than death.

When the chaste devotion of the last tones was hushed into silence, and a few words of appreciation had been spoken by the stranger, in a voice which quite satisfied the *artiste*, she said :

"I will give you a treasure in return for your kind words, signore. Beth, you will play us *my* sonata?"

"Certainly," said Beth. Here she was at home, and no false pride or obtrusive self-consciousness hampered her. She knew she could play, and she was pleased to give pleasure. So she took up her violin, and pressed it against her breast a moment ; but, once vibrating, she forgot all else.

The slumbering passion and pathos which underlay her nature flowed out in this beloved art, to which she had given years of study. She was really great at times, beautiful to look at, thrilling to listen to, infinite to suggest. No other person seemed to ensoul a sonata as did Bethesda. Every strain became a thought, and carried itself into one's brain. Each note seemed a magnet, to attract, and to hold. Finally, one felt one's self the instrument, and one's heartstrings were what she was touching, and each touch was an ecstasy and a pain ; and one would not have foregone this pain for the most brilliant joy.

When she finished and sank back, half-benumbed, as always by playing, Evra came and took the violin away, with cold hands and burning eyes.

"You outdid yourself ; is Mozart actually in you ? I believe sometimes you are yourself a spirit, child."

"She is all spirit," said Signor Straora, standing near, and just touching her chair as if to detain her. What weird power was this that Beth exercised ? Every one felt it, and these artist natures more than all.

She smiled up at them both.

"I won't vanish," she said. "You make me feel quite eerie, you two, so serious, and yet so absurd. Come, I'll break the spell."

She sprang up and gave herself a little shake. As she did so the flower fell from her hair. Signor Straora instantly picked it up.

"There lies my power !" exclaimed Beth, "in Evra's gift. Sha'n't we give it to him, to use as an amulet against the witch, mademoiselle ?"

"Not against her," he said, with peculiar emphasis, as

Evra nodded assent. She left them and went over to say good-bye to Mrs. Trescott.

Signor Straora seized his opportunity, and used it with good effect. He saw Miss Hamilton was softened by the music, and touched by their appreciation. He urged her to confer the greatest pleasure she could upon him, since his whole soul was in his art, and she, now, was necessary to it. He avoided with fine care too much personal warmth, and yet let his enthusiasm on art speak as it would. She wavered, and finally turned to her aunt.

Mrs. Trescott was quick in discerning the undercurrents of society where no personal bias blinded her, and was fond of saying that she had yet to see the man who could conceal his love for any woman when she had once seen the two together. She generally prevented any possible mistake by taking it for granted that any given man loved any given woman whom he had met, until the contrary was proved; and the contrary of love is not hate, but indifference.

She shrewdly suspected, therefore, that Signor Straora was "in love" with her niece, but she did not look upon this as any reason why she should refuse a favour that would bring a rich reward. She never threw away anything she desired because of a doubt about using the means she had in her hand; that is, she was always sure she had a right to use them.

So now she said: "Of course Beth will go. It is very kind of you to urge it, yet I think it will be a pleasure to you also, and Beth is glad to do a kindness. When shall we come, signore? and when can we hope to see the portrait? Do you know," turning to Miss Conover, "we never have had a glimpse of it yet. The whims of artists, however, are to be considered, I suppose."

Meantime Signor Straora was looking at Beth, still unsatisfied. He wished to have her free consent; he wished it to come from her. She understood, and smiled brightly.

"Yes, I will come, since auntie consents. I don't doubt it will be enjoyable; and then it is a pleasure, isn't it, signore, to give pleasure? I am quite selfish in it, you see."

It can hardly be expressed what this favour was to the artist. He felt it a question concerning not alone his art, not even principally that, but his most elevated happiness, an inspiration to heart, brain, and soul, such as he had never experienced before. It was not love he felt; rather that uplifted devotion which rendered Dante and Petrarch great—that

choosing as the type of all perfection one woman, and worshipping none but her.

Yet Beth was only a pretty American girl with faults, and vanities, and narrownesses such as frail humanity will have ; such as Beatrice herself, the divine Beatrice, no doubt also possessed ; and she did not realise at all what had come to her ; indeed, would have considered it unheard-of arrogance to dream of it.

She had become, in fact, during this interview somewhat ashamed of having taken for granted what had not been even hinted, only felt. But it is just here a woman's responsibility lies. Bethesda was not clear-sighted in regard to the love of men. What blinded her ? She often asked herself this afterwards, but she never gained a satisfactory reply. Was it vanity ? Surely for it to be hard to realise persons loved her, was not to be vain. She saw nothing in herself worthy of love, so did not expect it. Was this vanity ? Rather, what else could it be ? The doubt implied that the bestowal of love proved the value was in herself ; whereas it is only the affluence of love, falling, like the rain upon the just and unjust, which makes any one the recipient of devotion from another. Love comes to us rather for what we should be than what we are. But Beth did not understand this. Only loving, and feeling how the divine source of love makes it spring beyond all persons to its fountainhead could teach her.

This is what had taught Straora, and, trembling on the brink of his delight, he felt himself incapable of remaining in her presence ; he dared not even kiss her hand, but took his hat and fled.

He returned in the evening, however, to accompany them to the opera. It was a magnificent success, and it is impossible to convey an idea of an Italian audience under the thrall of such an artistic creation as that given them of *Pocohanta* by La Cinoni. For the time being they live in the lives portrayed before them, feeling the surging music as they would their own passions, and calmed at its command as at that of a god. Nothing can equal the intoxication of holding such an audience in one's hand, and seeing it quiver with each tone and gesture.

Cinoni had the tears in her eyes as she came forward between the tenor and composer, and was greeted with a real ovation. She tried to transfer some of the applause to her

companions, but they joined in it to the delight of the public. She had made its supreme success in her masterly rendering of passion and despair. They felt that nothing could express their gratitude.

As Mrs. Trescott and Miss Hamilton drove home escorted by Signor Straora, Beth leaned back in her corner, an indistinct white figure in the semi-darkness.

Presently she said :

"Did you ever think in going to the opera, signore, that there must be many persons present who are going through stirring dramas of their own?"

"I never did—until to-night," he replied, bending forward, eager to catch a glimpse of her face. But without noticing his movement she continued :

"I wonder if each life is not set to music as much as an opera? Surely we can make it what we will, either a sublime symphony, a glorious anthem, or a requiem. Sometimes I think that if we only listened closely enough we might hear the orchestral accompaniment, and gain strength from the knowledge that discords only chord at last."

There was a solemnity in her tone which prevented a ready reply, and in a moment or two she spoke in a more natural voice, but with an echo of passionate sadness :

"Poor Pocohanta! in losing her lover she lost the keynote of her existence, and all she could do was to end the distorted harmony. Death must be the result of a broken heart. But in our day no one should have a broken heart. Love is not all in the world, even for a woman; there is something higher and greater."

"There is nothing so sweet," murmured the artist, thrown off his guard. He had listened to her as to an oracle. She seemed miles above him; he never thought of touching her, but his heart spoke almost unconsciously in those few words. She might require an utter sacrifice from him, but he knew its worth.

On this strained intensity of feeling Mrs. Trescott broke with a laugh.

"What fol-de-rol talking of dying for love! The heart is altogether too elastic for that, isn't it, signore? We know better than this little romantic maiden, eh?"

"I doubt if we know so well," replied Signor Straora gravely, and to his relief they arrived at home.

CHAPTER III.

“ Ah, the little more, and how much it is !
And the little less, and what worlds away !
How a sound shall quicken content to bliss,
Or a breath suspend the blood’s best play,
And life be a proof of this ! ”

ROBERT BROWNING.

THE second morning after the representation of *Pocohanta* was the one on which Beth and her aunt first returned to Signor Straora’s studio. The bright sunlight and the fresh air had banished all Beth’s ghosts, and she was in a joyous mood, dancing around her aunt with a frolicsomeness that caused Mrs. Trescott to watch her a little. Could the child be really interested in the painter ?

“ You don’t seem particularly unhappy at the thought of sitting again,” she remarked.

“ Not a bit of it,” answered Beth frankly. “ You know I dislike refusing requests more than almost anything else ; and then you are pleased now, auntie. That makes me happy.”

Mrs. Trescott pushed her reassurance a question further.

“ And Signor Straora ? ”

“ Oh yes ; I like to please him too. He has not had a very pleasant life, they say, and I am glad to tuck any small repugnance I may feel into my pocket for the sake of giving him something nice to think about ; and,” with a gay smile, “ I’m nice, auntie, am I not ? ”

“ You will do,” answered Mabel, in a well-pleased voice. “ You look about four years old this morning, and are just as much of a sunbeam as you were then. I hope you will stay my little girl for ever so many years yet, though, of course, you must marry some time.”

“ I would begin to mourn over it now, if I were in your place,” exclaimed Beth. “ It is the wisest plan in this vale of tears to prepare for sorrow and never expect joy. Do cry a little about my marrying ; right off, now ; won’t you please, auntie ? Indeed, we might cry together, for it will be far more lamentable to me. Now, let’s begin together. One——”

“ You foolish child ! ” laughed Mabel. “ What nonsense

you can talk ! Run away and get ready. We will postpone our tears till a more propitious occasion."

Notwithstanding this youthful exuberance of spirits Beth dressed herself very demurely in a gray gown, determined to be quite dignified ; but she could not help smiling as she met her own dancing eyes in the mirror.

"I am not very ugly," she thought, "and I am quite content to be pretty to-day. It can't harm anybody."

When they reached the studio building, with its sombre cypresses opposite, a shadow was cast for a moment over the sparkling eyes and bright face. Had she any right to return here, where she might be putting sorrow into another's life, and lift through the radiant sunshine some such gloomy monument as one of these ?

But Signor Straora had been on the watch for them, and now came running down to welcome his guests. There was a pleasure in his bearing (he had to hold a strong rein on himself not to show too much), which, however illogically, restored Beth's gladness of spirit.

When the door into the studio was opened Beth could not restrain an exclamation of delight. Through an immense window, from which the gray shades were drawn aside, the light was streaming in a yellow glory, and on every side it was reflected by armour and weapons, which were arranged in groups on the tapestried walls. Finely-carved guitars, flutes, and other musical instruments, were laid in artistic confusion on mosaic and ebony tables ; old cabinets of ivory and sandal-wood stood against Japanese screens, which formed odd corners, where lacquer ware and Venetian glass were mingled in incongruous harmony. The most striking object in the room was a screen crossing the whole length of the apartment, and rising almost to the frescoed ceiling. It was made of panels of deep red damask, framed in carved ebony ; and, propped or hung on the protuberances of the carving, were unfinished sketches and rough outlines of heads and limbs ; while all around the room, on easels and chairs, were paintings—some of weird scenery, and some of elfish figures, that peopled the room with witches.

But the completing touch, and the one that pleased Beth most, was the bright wood fire. It had never been there before.

"I observed that you had a fire always burning," explained

their host, "and I wished to make it as comfortable for you as I could."

There could hardly have been a greater concession made by an Italian, for they prefer to shiver over a "scaldino" rather than to "oppress the lungs," as they insist a fire always does. But radical changes were being made in at least one Italian by this American girl. Mrs. Trescott wondered even if he did not intend the fire as a symbol of the warmth which had been lighted in his heart by Beth's unconscious hands.

She had gone immediately to the hearth, and stood there with one dainty foot on the fender, delighted by the scene, and permeated with the sense of pleasure from unobtrusive admiration, as well as from the blazing logs.

One brand fell forward.

"Oh," she said quickly, "give me the tongs. Thanks. There!" dexterously readjusting the sticks, "you cannot be expected to know how to tend to a fire. It takes a woman to keep it from doing damage."

He was watching her with an almost painful delight. Think of a Beatrice condescending to arrange a domestic hearth!

She looked up at him smiling and a little flushed. Instantly down fell the tongs with a clatter, and she moved away to her seat. How about the vague uneasiness, which was the utmost she had acknowledged to herself, then?

"Please, signorina," said the artist from the easel in a business-like tone (he had realised his danger), "will you turn this way? It is essential that I should see your eyes now."

"Must I look at you, then, all the time?" asked Beth, a little wickedly in spite of herself.

A quick answer flashed in Signor Straora's eyes, but he did not give it utterance.

"Look anywhere you choose," he said quietly, "so that it is towards me."

"That is my Sphinx-like expression, eh?" she said, a little impatient at her position. "I wonder how you ever fancied I looked like the Sphinx anyway. Do you know, signore, it is rather a doubtful compliment? As I remember her, she had no nose, and her stony complexion looked as if she had been visited by a gigantic smallpox."

"It is not in those points that I trace the resemblance."

"No? Well, that is comforting. Didn't the Sphinx have

the privilege of asking a question of every one who approached her?" she went on after a moment's pause. Someway, she could not bear silence to-day, with his hand and eyes working so swiftly. She felt all the blemishes there were in her face; she must take her mind off it—this miserable self-consciousness!

He had hesitated before answering her. Now he said gravely: "Yes, signorina."

"And wasn't there some dreadful penalty attached if he did not answer?"

"The sacrifice of his life, signorina."

This was becoming altogether too serious.

"I can't play at any such game as that if you do call me the Sphinx," she said lightly. "What does the mysterious creature mean, after all, signore?"

"I cannot say; I can at most only paint it." He stood back from the easel, surveying the work and the model critically. "It is your eyes that escape me. In them lies the whole secret of the expression. There is a deep question in them; a wealth of expression—— Ah, signorina! don't mock at me!"

Beth's eyes were dancing now, and she broke into a peal of hearty laughter as she exclaimed:

"Let me translate the question for you, signore; it is indeed deep. What do you expect to answer when you are accused of sending me to perdition by flattery?"

"I, flatter? Pardon," he said, persistently grave. "I think you cannot recall a single word of even most deserved appreciation. It is too common for you."

Beth's gaiety was silenced by his tone. She played with the beads in her lap, a trifle embarrassed.

"Madama," said the artist to Mrs. Trescott, "cannot you suggest something which will keep la signorina from being too much *ennuyée*?"

"Give her a book, and let her read aloud to us. It may entertain you as well as her."

"I do not doubt it; but I have few books," he said, taking a handful from a table near by. "Here is a work on art; you surely will not care for that, Mees Hamiltone? Nor this on Egypt? You see I have been looking up Egyptian history to explain you. Nor this——?"

"Let me have the Egyptian one," said Beth, with interest. "I should like myself to find out what is the explanation given of me."

He came forward to hand it to her, but stopped suddenly.

"No, please, not this," he said deprecatingly.

"Why not?"

"Because I—I greatly prefer not."

"Then there is no reason for it, signore?" she said, instinctively trying her power over him.

"No, it is a whim of mine," he answered hastily, slipping the volume under the others. "This will suit you much better," and he offered her a collection of poems.

"No, I don't care for that; I want the other. It is a whim of mine," she added, mimicking his deep tones with bewitching effect. "Please give me it."

She held out her hand, the rosy palm upwards. It was a very little thing that she asked. Why not? Of course the book was hers.

She opened it eagerly and glanced through the closely-printed pages, reading bits such as these:—"The meaning of the Sphinx is the great enigma of life; the earnest seeking after truth, which has existed in all times. It is the mystery of the unknown."

"And I look so wondrously mysterious, do I?" commented Beth, although the query in her eyes deepened in spite of her light words. They were only the foam on the surface of the sea.

"'Her figure was placed before every temple.' You have marked that," she said, glancing up. He was busy, and did not reply.

"'The Sphinx has a lion's body, with two wings, and a virgin's head.' Poor virgin! Now, what do you suppose that means, signore?"

"The natural and the ideal, and the intelligence which unites them."

"Why, there's something in it, isn't there?" she exclaimed, her intellect aroused. "But why should it be a lion?"

"For strength and courage. Those are the highest natural attributes."

"And the wings? Oh yes, I see. But is a virgin the highest in humanity?"

"Is she not?" he murmured very low.

Now as Beth sat there was an old copy of a Virgin over her head, and it would have been difficult to say which Signor Straora glanced at as he spoke these words. Beth remembered he was a Catholic, and explained his words quite simply.

"Why didn't you wish me to see this?" she asked presently, closing the book. "I don't see what troubled you."

"I thought you would not find it interesting," he answered in a relieved tone, but he incautiously showed a desire to regain it.

"No, there is something I haven't found!" she exclaimed. "Go to your easel, signore; you cannot have it yet."

She turned over a few pages carelessly, not really expecting to find anything, when her eye caught sight of a fine annotation, and heavy marks around a certain passage.

If she had read it she would have known with what exceeding reverence and devotion he regarded her; and the artist had been afraid it would rob him of his sittings. Moreover, he could not have her see it when she was in such a mood.

But of course she did not think of reading a word. She half closed the book, and said triumphantly:

"I have it!"

He took a long stride towards her.

"Signorina, you will give it to me?" His tone made it almost a command, and this made her defiant. She folded her hands over it.

"You gave it to me, signore."

For a moment they were both silent, her clear eyes encountering his with a curious expression of mingled fire, determination, and experiment.

"He shall not have the book," she was thinking; "but he ought to make me give it to him."

He half recognised the only way to cope with her was in placing entire confidence in her, but the impatience which so often foils victory—perhaps also his intense desire to prove to himself some influence over her—seized him then.

"Signora," he repeated, "you will give me that book."

"Are you quite sure?" she returned, smiling.

"Yes," he said; but Beth now detected a slight wavering in his tone.

"Why should I?" she asked.

"Because I desire it."

"Are your desires usually so important to me?" she exclaimed haughtily.

"They shall be—in this instance!" he replied with a fierce catch in his voice.

"Ah?"

She met his eyes again with dauntless resolution. It was a curious sight to see, this dainty, seated maiden defying with calm coolness the fiery-souled man who stood before her.

There was a moment's silence. Mrs. Trescott had dropped her work, and was watching with interest.

"He must conquer now or never," she thought.

His burning eyes plunged into his opponent's, and recognised there a superior strength. This woman possessed a power he could not thwart. Her indomitable spirit paralysed him, while raising his admiration, his passion, to a dizzy height.

He dared no longer look at her. Without a word he ground his heel on the marble floor, and, turning, left her.

Beth drew a long breath, and laid the book on the table. She leaned back in her chair then, her eyes brilliant as two stars, triumph and regret mingling strangely.

"What a disturbance over nothing!" exclaimed Mrs. Trescott, laughing. "You might a great deal better have taken my advice and read the poems, Beth. But here is your book, signore, and you had better make use of your model while you can."

Signor Straora did not answer. He had gone quite to the other end of the room, and was hidden by a screen.

Beth was already regretting her impulsive action. She did not blame herself for measuring lances, when it once came to battle, but she wished she had avoided the cause.

"I came to give him a pleasure, and I have annoyed him instead," she thought.

As he walked slowly towards her he saw the wistful expression on her face. His own was what the French call *morne*.

"Signora," he said, stopping at some little distance from her, "I cannot ask your pardon. I am not worthy of your favour." He took the book and laid it on the red coals.

"That, at least, will not come between us more."

Beth sprang up to rescue the book instinctively, but it was

too late. The blue flames shrivelled and curled the binding ; then crept in among the leaves, and burst forth into a bright conflagration.

Beth drew a step nearer. "I beg your pardon," she said earnestly. "I am grieved to make you lose your book."

"It is not the book," he murmured. Then, aloud : "You have nothing to regret, nor any pardon to ask. Indeed, that would be impossible from you to me." He stopped. The gray ashes were whirling up the chimney. "Addio!" he whispered, in an echo of passionate accents.

Beth was awed by his manner. She was silent and motionless. How she wished she had never returned!

Presently he moved a little towards her, and, with downcast eyes, began speaking rapidly:

"Madonna, you do not know what you have been to me ; what you are, and always will be. Nothing can rob me of you. I am as sure of you as of God's saints—as of our Blessed Lady." He paused, and his eyes now wandered with a despairing intensity over the lovely features, the tremulous mouth, and drooping lids of deep-set eyes.

"I am going away," he went on. "I am not worthy to be near you. I would gladly be the marble beneath your feet, to thrill with pleasure when you pressed it. But, I am not marble, and—I go away. Don't try to answer me. I know all you would say. Your face has become the best-known page in life to me. You cannot conceal what you think ; and yet, I never can read deep enough."

The fluttering flush that came and went on her cheeks, the distress, the poignant regret, warned him he must not prolong his last study of this dearest face.

He bent before her, and took her two hands in his.

"Remember, I thank you," he said, "and I leave you."

He pressed one and the other hand to his lips.

"Addio, madonna mia."

Not daring to trust himself further, he bowed to Mrs. Trescott and left the room.

"What on earth does all this mean?" exclaimed Mabel. She had not overheard the low quick words.

"It means that we are to go. Come quick, auntie."

"You are the most incomprehensible couple!" said Mrs. Trescott, but she put on her hat and cloak.

When they were going downstairs Beth cried in an undertone:

"It is my fault, my fault! I ought never to have come back!"

Mabel's answer was an incredulous shrug of the shoulders.

"Now tell me what all this fuss is about," she said, as they entered the carriage.

"Oh, I can't!" said Beth in a choked voice. She had caught a glimpse of the cypresses, and these stirred recollections which made her self-reproach still more cutting.

"Pshaw!" said Mrs. Trescott, suddenly wise. "Don't make so much of it, child. He'll get over his sweet trouble soon enough. A little love hurts no man. Each one thinks his heart is broken, of course, when the self-conceit is flattened out of it; but it is a very elastic contrivance, which soon puffs out again. Don't worry."

Beth hardly heard her. "I have done wrong, wrong," she was saying to herself. "I wish I were ugly and hateful. I don't see why persons like me—— I am not worthy of it,—and I have hurt him so!"

It showed the difference between the two. These little things made the "divide." Streams whose springs were close together would, as they increased, empty into different seas.

In the evening a letter was handed Mrs. Trescott from the artist. He thanked them for their great kindness, and told them he was obliged to leave the city for an indefinite period. He ended the short note with these words:—

"You have given me the purest and noblest hours of my existence, and whatever the future may bring, believe that the inspiration contained in them will not stop with this world. If at any time my life can be of service to you, command it.—
Devotedly yours, ALBERTO STRAORA DI ALBANA."

CHAPTER IV.

"They fail, and they alone, who have not striven."

J. B. ALDRICH.

"Thine eyes, too wise, are heavy with the dole,
The doubt, the dread, of all this human maze."

R. W. GILDER.

IT was the end of February; a day deepened in beauty from the one on which Bethesda had lain on the sod in the garden, and afterwards had consented to return to Signor Straora's studio; but the air was only more deliciously soft, the tenderness of the landscape but more articulate, and Bethesda a little lovelier. A month could not pass with her now, any more than with the spring, and not leave its slow, sweet traces. It begins early in Italy, but only reaches perfection there, as elsewhere, in the midst of June roses.

Bethesda was waiting now outside the English bank, where her aunt had gone for letters. The old Florentine palace, thus desecrated, towered majestically into the sunshine, and formed a rugged background to the varied life of the street; and the lounging idlers, the busy hucksters, the crippled beggars, and energetic foreigners, all turned to give at least a second glance at the dainty figure seated in the little phaeton.

She would have been surprised had she known how many, who were entire strangers, were well acquainted with her habits, and looked for her passing as something worth watching for. She was one of those women whose faces grow more beautiful as they become familiar, and which do not need a voice to speak. The simple discerning Italians pointed her out to one another with real affection, and called her: Our lovely lady.

She found this morning the glances she attracted somewhat embarrassing at last, and exclaimed joyfully when Mrs. Trescott appeared, a packet of letters in her hand.

"Isn't it delightful to have such a big mail?" she said. "Who is that thick one of yours from? Aunt Agatha? Couldn't we break our rule just for to-day, and glance over some of these now?"

"No, Beth, don't. Trouble will come quick enough any

way. There's something wrong in those letters. Oh, I know it. You needn't argue with me. I have had a spell without any trouble, and now it's bound to come ; so let us enjoy our drive while we can."

"As you like, dear. Presentiments can only be met by proving there is nothing in them, or else by making up one's mind to meet whatever may come bravely ; but——"

"You needn't preach to me. Try and make me forget it rather. That is the best you can do."

It was again an example of their difference. She had tried to give what she sought on that day in December : a strengthening in view of some calamity. But she was finding out that it is not by any means an infallible rule to do as one would be done by. Some natures are diametrically opposed : what is kind to one is cruel to the other.

She made an effort, therefore, to do as her aunt had done by her ; talked to her cheerily and entertainingly, and was rewarded by the gloom lifting somewhat from Mrs. Trescott's face.

During this they passed the Porta Romana, and followed the road which wound upwards in easy curves, bordered by trees which cast young shadows across the wide walks and gardens, that filled in the interstices of the doubling carriage-way. On either side ancient and modern villas rose, among shimmering olive groves, whose leaves stirred in the sunny air, and caught lights never twice the same.

"Does this ever cease to be a surprise?" said Beth. "Day after day we come by here, and still it is always new, always an unexpected foretaste of the pleasure we know is beyond."

"Dear Italy !" exclaimed Mabel, throwing a kiss to the landscape with her usual extravagance. "Who cares for presentiments while we can breathe this air, and smell this fragrance, and look at this view, and, in short, drive around the Via dei Colli !"

"Here is the field where we gathered wild-flowers last year ; don't you want to try now ?"

"Yes, that will be charming."

A moment later they were pushing their way through a wild hedge, and, amidst the sprouting grain, along the fringed edges of the field, delightedly espied hyacinths and harebells,

violets and anemones, and the voluptuous narcissi, passionate as a southern beauty.

After the first exclamations they gathered the blossoms in silence, except for a cry now and then from Mabel. Nature's unseen incense, rising around them, seemed to have permeated Beth, for when she joined Mabel at last her liquid eyes were eloquent of mysteries half revealed, of truths whose fragrance came to her as the flower-scents did. What was it about odours being like the prayers of saints?

"Just see these narcissi," she said. "Aren't thick white blossoms intense beyond all the coloured flowers? It is surely the white heat, which seems cool from its very excess."

"Ugh! they're suffocating!" exclaimed Mabel, pushing them away, and hurrying to the carriage. "Come; it's horribly hot in the sun."

The coachman stopped again on the top of the hill, without waiting to be told. Often the ladies sat here for half an hour, at the base of the great bronze David, with the cypresses of San Miniato piercing the deep purple sky, like a reticent question, behind them.

Beneath lay the most beautiful valley and city in the world. There were the narrow, irregular streets of the old town, and the house-covered bridges, under which ran the yellow Arno, now filled by snow gathered from the spring-touched Apennines. Across the river statued palaces extended their porticoes to the river's edge, and beyond lay the mass of merchant houses, surmounted at close intervals by domes and spires, uplifting high into the violet air the holy, golden cross.

As they sat there, from a hundred towers rang forth the bells, announcing the hour of noon, the twelfth hour which combines those of all the apostles; and as the mellow chimes died away in the purple shadows of the hills, the silence brought an indescribable sensation of listening angels bending over the city in a radiance so bright that they could not be seen.

Involuntarily following the echoing sounds Beth's eyes wandered off over the far distance, where the exquisitely shaded mountains fell back to give place to the sea-like valley; and the peaks of Carrara lifted high their snowy heads above the hearts where lie untold beauties of future statues. Beyond these there was only the sky,—the heavens,—that is all. But

the mighty light made this blue too glorious for human eyes, so they fell, and followed back again the billowy mountains, rising and sinking in the wondrous atmosphere, bearing castles and peasant homes alike upon their bosoms, to the gray walls of Fiesole.

Over the face of Bethesda, as she gazed, swept the expression of many unuttered, uncomprehended thoughts. The beauty oppressed while it exalted her. She felt wide wings unfold themselves to bear her up, and her body held her down. She would have liked to be the life in the earth, the warmth in the air, the light in the sun; anything great and impersonal, which would satisfy this strange yearning within her, that seemed infinite in its capacity, and would not be subdued.

"Gracious, child! What *are* you thinking about?"

Beth started sensitively, and turned back to the carriage. She could not try to talk any more. She felt hushed, yet thrilled, as if breathing in the silence before a voice should speak.

Mabel's heavy depression closed in upon them both as they drove home, where the letters must soon be read. Mrs. Trescott did not care to make an effort to diminish its effect.

"What is the good?" she said, when Beth tried to rouse her. "It's only one thing more, and life has not been so easy to me thus far that I should expect anything but trouble in the future. It has been hard, hard; motherless, homeless, childless, a widow and an exile;—and now—who knows what worse is coming?"

She looked with dislike on the packet bearing the handwriting usually so warmly welcomed.

"How grieved Aunt Agatha and Margaret would be to have their letters meet with such a reception!" said Beth; and then, seeing it useless to say more, and perhaps a little of the weight of Mabel's gloom falling on her too, they drove the rest of the way in silence.

Her shadowy room looked very calm and restful to the girl after the warm drive and oppressive mental atmosphere. She let herself drop on the lounge, and lay there a few moments in utter lassitude. Then she roused herself with a start.

"Bah! it is better to bring down the sword of Damocles on one's devoted head than fear what may not exist."

She tore open one of the envelopes bearing her sister's handwriting. It commenced abruptly:—

"Father is ill, very ill. They say he will not live. Miss Sink is nursing him. If it were not for that I should go to him. Aunt Agatha kindly said she would go with me, if I wished it, but I told her no. Was I right? Would you have done the same? Our lawyer is to keep us posted. If father asks for us, for either of us, of course I will start at once."

The rest of the letter, about other things, Beth read without understanding. It was appalling, someway, to be so far off, and not aware whether her father, now, was alive or dead.

She had known him but very little. His wife had died at her birth, and he had separated himself almost entirely from his children, leaving them in the care of their young aunts, who had been brought up by his wife, and were then unmarried. His life was of a description which made him feel less uneasy away from the innocent eyes of his children and the wiser ones of their protectors. He had a large fortune, and was liberal with it, so that he was quite willing to give a generous allowance to "the girls" for the care of their little nieces. When Agatha married, the two were left under Mabel's charge; but later, after her own romantic marriage to a lover upon his death-bed, Mr. Hamilton showed some desire to regain control of his children. At first it was looked upon as a hopeful sign, then recognised as only a deeper step into evil. He was no longer ashamed. Mabel now saw her opportunity of fulfilling a lifelong wish and going abroad. Every year made it more dangerous for the children, as long as they were under age. There was "a scene" with Mr. Hamilton—a power which Mrs. Trescott had always held over the man, lashing him with her sarcasm and bitter invectives, like a second Queen Margaret, and he could not walk on, regardless of the stinging scorpions, like another Richard. So she had her way. She shook with energy the dust of America from her feet, glad to leave all old associations and begin life anew.

It was a new life, at all events, for in the first year she heard of the death of Milton Eglamore, the one man she had loved, and who had broken their engagement for some trifling cause. This had been the real reason of her hasty marriage. She wanted to put something between her and the memory of her "dastard" lover. It had hardly been successful. As long as there was life there was hope. When this went out, however,

after the first shock, the rich widow became more lively and dashing than ever. She called herself "an exile" at times, but in reality she liked Europe. It would be a trial to her to give it up. Margaret had gone home as soon as she was of age to live with Agatha Stanhope, and presently Beth would be of age too. She could return then also, but Mrs. Trescott did not eagerly anticipate that repeal of the decree of banishment. In any case there was a year more, and who knew what might not happen in a year?

Beth knew the facts of all this; she surmised, perhaps, the feelings. She had been brought up in the knowledge of more of the darker side in life than most women of her class and years. It had perhaps given her her earnestness and yearning to do right; but she had little to steady her. Now, looking out into this life from which her own had sprung, seeing it on the verge of the unknown and awful future, she shrank back appalled.

Presently, however, she opened another letter of later date.

"We received a telegram to-day," it said. "Father died last night quite easily, and seemingly content. He never mentioned either of us. When Mr. Simpson asked him at last if he should not send for me, 'No,' he said; 'the will is right; the will is right.' That was all. Uncle Raleigh goes on to-night to be present at the reading of the will."

Beth dropped the paper, and sat looking out with unseeing eyes on the swaying branches and blue sky visible through the lattice.

Could it be that her *father* was dead and she felt no more? Oh, the sadness of it, the bitter sadness, that she could not grieve for him! She would have done much to have helped him. It had been a dream all her life that some time she might be of service to him. She had thought of his old age, and his daughters caring for him. And this was the end—this was all.

Hark! what was that? It sounded like a sob. Yes, and there was another. In an instant Beth had unfastened the door into Mrs. Trescott's room and had sprung to Mabel's side. She was sitting by a table, her face hidden, and was crying violently.

"Dear heart, what is the matter?" Beth exclaimed, while she knelt and put her arm around the quivering figure.

There was no answer but an acceleration of sobs at the caressing touch, and a gradual subsidence of them as the sympathetic silence calmed and healed. At last Mabel put the letter which had caused the outburst into Beth's hand, indicating with a gesture for her to read it in her own room.

Bethesda did as she was bidden. The letter was one from Agatha. It was later than either of Margaret's, and told of Mr. Stanhope's return. Mr. Hamilton's will had been read, and was found to leave his property to his daughters, half and half. Mrs. Trescott and Mr. Stanhope were left joint guardians. There was no word of regret or affection, but his acts had spoken well for his feelings towards his children. He had no wish to rob them of what was rightfully theirs.

"You can come home now without fear," continued Agatha, "and I am sure you must be anxious to do so. It is undoubtedly your duty. The girls both need what they have never had—a home which they feel to be permanent. You will be happier in one yourself. Besides, here are all these business affairs to settle in which you and Raleigh are equally concerned; and Raleigh's care of your own money was first proposed for two years only, and under a pressure of circumstances now removed. He is still willing to do all the work, but he wishes you to share the responsibility. I hope you will come home as early as possible and settle near us. There is a pretty house whose grounds adjoin ours which is now for sale. Margaret and I think it would just suit you all. I remember Beth admired it when she was here. I have asked them to hold it until I hear from you.

"Is our girlish intercourse to be renewed in happier surroundings? And shall we enjoy together seeing our nieces develop and mature?"

Could it be this which had caused Mrs. Trescott's passionate outburst? Yes, Beth could see how it appeared to her aunt. She was suddenly asked—perhaps she might even think coerced—to give up Europe, in whose free life Beth knew she delighted. She was accountable to nobody but herself here; she could do as she chose; she need not look at the serious side of things any more than it pleased her. Over there it would be quite different. Beth had keenly recognised this during her visit to America. She could feel how the hampering of family consultations would chafe her aunt, accustomed to having her own will

an unquestioned law. But there was the affection, the stability, the home life ! Yet these would not compensate to her aunt, she knew. Change, travel, and society had taken their place. Thoughts had given way to things. It was all a pleasant, outward life here ; there it was earnest and thoughtful.

It would be a trial to Aunt Mabel, but it must be done, decided Beth. Her own heart yearned for her sister and aunt. For America ? Well, no, she could not truthfully say that. She liked Europe too. It was more homelike to her than America. They might come back again for a visit some time. Now it was their duty, as Aunt Agatha said, to make a home.

But Aunt Mabel must not be forced in any sense. She must take her own way. This house in S——. It was a rare chance, but if Aunt Mabel felt badly about it, it must be given up, for to take it would be a continual misery to her. America was large ; they might settle anywhere ; but anywhere out of S—— : it would have to be these two alone. Margaret would not feel it right to leave the Stanhopes. Still, Beth was willing. She could not have her aunt, who had done so much for her, unhappy.

The troubles she foresaw worried the girl, and yet whenever there came a lull in her thoughts these things sank into insignificance within the terrible silence of her father's unloved death. Where was he now ? What did he know now ? And the darkness and the sense of vastness crushed her.

CHAPTER V.

"Men, at some time, are masters of their fates."

Julius Cæsar.

WHILE Bethesda was still thinking a knock came at the door, and a telegram was handed her. Rendered fearful by the unwonted emotions of the day, the yellow envelope caused her a momentary chill, and she tore it open hastily to end suspense.

It was in French, which relieved her fears, but surprised her.

"Hope to be in Florence Thursday, only for a few hours.

May I see you in the evening? I entreat assent. Will await your answer.—RENÉ D'ISTEN."

"How very peculiar!" exclaimed Beth, her sensitive lips gathering a little scorn.

She took the missive immediately to her aunt, who was writing, and looked up with hot angry eyes.

"Nothing is the matter, auntie," said the girl; "it is only a telegram from your friend M. d'Isten."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Mabel, surprised into forgetfulness of her troubles.

While she read Beth watched, and saw it did indeed change the current of her aunt's mind. She half smiled as she laid it down.

"At least he is not timid," she said.

"Rather audacious, I should say. Excuse me for opening it. I did so by mistake. The boy is waiting."

"Shall I answer it?" asked Mrs. Trescott undecidedly.

"I cannot say," answered Beth in a reticent tone. "That is a question no one but you can decide."

"It seems as if I ought, when he says he will wait for it. But I can't think very well," she said, putting her hand to her head pitifully. "Do tell me what to do."

"How can I say, auntie dear? You must remember I know nothing of how you stand. Weren't you offended with him? Do you wish to see him?"

"The last I heard from him," said Mrs. Trescott evasively, "he assured me I had entirely misunderstood him. He was sure if we met he could convince me. Of course he couldn't; but then, it looks as if he had some excuse to telegraph this, doesn't it?"

"Do you wish to hear the excuse? That is the only question. If you think it is a matter which cannot be explained, there is no use in seeing him. If you consider it may be a mere misunderstanding, why, let him come."

"Then you advise his coming?"

"No, I don't advise anything. I know nothing about it, remember."

"I think I will give him the opportunity, and see what he makes of it," decided Mabel after a moment's thought. "I used to like him very much, and it is pleasant to have warm

friends ; never pleasanter than when your relatives are treating you harshly."

The bitter look came again in her face as she turned to her portfolio.

"How shall I word it?" she asked, with an appealing glance from abused eyes.

"Why don't you say clearly it is for an explanation?"

"How can I? Here, you write it. My head is in a whirl."

She rose and threw herself on the sofa, while Beth quickly wrote:—

"Madame Trescott will receive Monsieur d'Isten if he thinks himself authorised to call."

She read it aloud.

"It is surely cold enough, but better so perhaps. And now tell me," she added, when Beth had despatched the boy, "what do you think of Agatha's letter?"

"I think you had better simply tell her now that you won't take the house, and decide the rest later. You were writing to her?"

"Yes ; but I did not say that."

"Will you let me add it, then, and take the letter?" asked Beth very gently. She saw her aunt's eyes filling again, and would have liked to spare her. Somehow to-day she was trying to do her best actively, with a stealthy sense of un-reality beneath.

"You are quite sure you don't want the house?" said Mabel, ready to sob again.

"Not unless you wish it, auntie dear."

"You know I would be utterly wretched there!" cried Mabel, flashing forth a moment. "A western town!—And right after Europe!—It is cruel to propose such a thing—I thought Agatha knew—knew, and cared for—me—more."

"Let me add that you won't take the house," said Beth. "That is decided. No one, dear auntie, wants you to go where you will be unhappy."

"I don't know," said Mrs. Trescott, between her sobs ; "but—we can take another house—later—if you—want to."

"I sha'n't want one until you do, rest assured," said Beth in a cheery tone ; and then she hurriedly added a few words to the angry pages, and took the letter away, promising herself

not to mail it, but keep it quietly until the next day. Mabel might regret some of the harsh things she had said by that time. Beth did not yet understand that for Mrs. Trescott to regret anything sufficiently to wish to take it back would be to shatter the whole fabric of her character.

In the rich luxurious room to which Beth now returned a very Cleopatra in variability was lying on the lounge, ready to burst into tears again, or to be coaxed into smiles.

Beth did not excite either. At such a time her tenderness was especially healing. And now, as she stood at the head of the couch, and smoothed the burning forehead, not speaking a word, but covering Mabel with the shelter of her care, she soothed her almost to sleep.

Finally she left her on tiptoe, and went into her own room, and put on her white wrapper, and bathed her face. What a full day it had been, and how tired she was!

But she must write a few words of explanation to Aunt Agatha, and thank Uncle Raleigh, and say a little something to Margaret, her only sister; the two orphans now together.

She had just finished when a well-known knock came at the door, and Beth hastened to open it, feeling especially glad to see Evra, now that she was sore at heart, and impotent to disentangle the threads of love which seemed to be tying themselves in a hard knot around her.

The keen ear of the artist instantly detected the quiver of sorrow and fatigue, however, and Beth's face was worn, for she was one on whom worry told more than much physical pain.

"What is the matter, dearest?" exclaimed Evra, throwing aside a choice cluster of lilies and roses to take Beth's hands in both hers.

"We have had letters——"

"Letters?" interrupted Evra, as she saw it was hard for Beth to speak. "I know what that is! And they have been hurting my Lily? It's cruel!"

"It's not me, Evra; and it could not be helped. But—O Evra! my father is dead."

Then the tired heart broke down, and she buried her face in Evra's breast and cried miserably.

The artist held her with the utmost tenderness, saying many

endearing things, and, with ready comprehension, trying to strengthen rather than soothe her.

"I am ashamed," said Beth presently. "It was foolish in me to break down so. You must not think it is only my father's death," she added, sensitive to the least suspicion of hypocrisy. "We have seen nothing of him for years, and I hardly knew him. It was the shock, I suppose, and auntie's being quite upset by some plans. They wish us to go home as soon as possible, and auntie feels badly about it. I have been trying to help her, and never thought of crying until I saw you."

"Because you knew I would understand, cara. It has worn you out, supporting your aunt. It's a shame for one so delicate to be tried so. Don't bother about the flowers now. Come, lie down here, and let me sit beside you. Your hands are burning, child. This will never do. I shall carry you off, and keep all trouble from you. If I only could, dear!"

She made Beth lie down, and covered her with a shawl, petting her like a baby.

"Now, you are not to say a word, mind. Just give me your hand. Such dainty fingers!" She went on in an undertone to keep Beth quiet: "Feeling fingers, too; if I were ill, or sad, I know these could charm my trouble all away. Persons have such different hands. Mine, now; they are large, and not a bit pretty, but I can feel, can see, with them as though each finger had an eye. If I were blind, I think I could almost tell the colour of your little roseleaf hands. Ah, don't snatch it away so, dear! Well, if you insist, I shall just lay my head here, and we will be quite still."

A few moments passed silently; Beth's eyes were closed, with that strained look which shows they have difficulty in closing. There were heavy shadows beneath, and her cheeks were pallid.

While Evra was watching her anxiously the large eyes suddenly opened.

"I think I hear auntie moving," she said, half rising. "I must go and see if I can do anything for her."

"You shall keep quiet, my dear," remarked Evra firmly. "She probably isn't a quarter so much used up as you are. I will go. I will give her some of your flowers."

Mrs. Trescott was dressing languidly with a dark shadow on her face. She paid little attention to what Evra said, although she took the flowers with faint thanks.

"I am very sorry you are in trouble," continued Evra. "Is there anything I can do to help you throw off the blues? Come to dine with us, will you? Mother will be delighted, and it will seem pleasanter than for you two to be staying here alone. Will you?"

"Does Beth want to go?"

"I don't know. Will you, if she does? She is used up entirely, poor child," she added in a low tone. "She needs something to take her mind off."

"Well, I don't care what I do. It makes little difference where I am. You must excuse my lack of cordiality, but you see——"

"Oh yes; I understand. And now, Lily," returning to the other room, "what do you say? Will you take dinner with us? It will make it easier for you, dearest," she said, bending to kiss the smooth white brow.

"It is very good of you; I am afraid we will be poor company. But I should like to go, if you don't mind."

"Well, I do mind, decidedly! I would like to have you every hour of the twenty-four, and every day of the week. Now, what can I do for you? Your conscience is quieted, for Mrs. Trescott has shut the door, and you are to let me serve you. You are to give me the pleasure of doing something for for one I love."

"Sing to me, then."

Sitting there by Beth's lounge, on a lowly tabouret, the great artist sang ballad after ballad, and lullabies; and at last, by some secret attraction, sacred songs, full of strength and richness.

Bethesda was soon entranced beyond all thought of worry. Music was a real potency in her life, and she was quickly attuned to harmony. Now she thought, with a hushed wonder, of how intricately the hope of redeeming her father was woven into all her own musical studies. And now—now—*was* this all she would ever know of fatherhood?

The glorious voice soared, and lifted her on its strong wings. She felt there must be something more. For is there any art which expresses religion so well as music? The craving, the aspiration, the harmony, the insubstantiality which comes so near being pure spirituality,—what is more like religion? A keynote found and held is necessary to all harmony. Then the innumerable chords, the notes so distant, yet the same;

the sounds that come, perhaps, from wooden keys, and end—who knows where?—are combined, multiplied, reproduced, in a true order, which allows of no discord, and which are merged into the eternal symphony of creation, by the sure triumph of a great and patient musician.

Who with an ear for music can wonder that Saint Cecilia should have heard the continuation of her strains, and believed they were from heaven?

Evra looked up finally, and found Bethesda lying in the twilight, her eyes shining, and solemn, and tender.

"My darling!" she exclaimed, putting her hand upon her almost as if to hold her down.

"Yes, dear," said Beth softly, "your singing has done me much good. It has taken all the soreness out of my heart. You are very good to me."

"*I good to you!* Well, that is a way! But now I must go home. I have to announce your arrival to mamma. Come soon, won't you, dearest?"

CHAPTER VI.

"To depict such a character is like trying to catch a meteor and make it sit for its picture."—MRS. JAMESON.

To fertilise an arid grief, one must strike deep, even to the waters of truth, which underlie all lives as streams underlie all lands.

DURING the next few days there were many talks between Mrs. Trescott and Beth, which were both exciting and exhausting; for Mrs. Trescott was a very tempest of emotion, and dissolved in a torrent of tears, or fired into furious anger, according as she felt herself more abused or insulted. Mrs. Stanhope had no right to dictate to her, bid her stay, or call her home, as if she were a puppet! She could judge for herself. She wouldn't go home until she chose. The trail of the serpent was over all America now; she could not *bear* to think of returning! And then tears again.

The truth was, that the imperceptible release of self-control during the careless life she had led of late had crept within. Superficial treatment cures no disease; it but forces it inward to work destruction on the vital organs. Her desire to find pleasure in exterior things, so that she might forget the hollow-

ness beneath, took from her interior strength. Beth, perhaps, had been the one link which had bound her to her old life; the one, at least, that she could not ignore. Yet Beth was the reason, or the excuse, of their staying abroad, and when it was taken away Mabel collapsed, and felt the cruelty of her own emptiness. Now came the revenge of unused energies, of crushed capacities; now she began to poignantly feel that there was a lack somewhere, and she laid it on the first thing that came to hand, and believed her sorrow all to arise from the unkindness of her friends.

Numerous plans were, of course, canvassed. Mrs. Trescott unwillingly admitted the necessity of returning home during the summer, but she set the time in July, because then the Stanhopes would probably be at the seaside, and she would feel more "independent," where they met on equal ground, than when visiting at their house. What the ultimate decision about settling would be was vague as a summer wind. Mabel did not wish to give up Mr. Stanhope as manager of her affairs, for he was a man of the strictest integrity and admirable business capacity; but at the same time she was violently opposed to sacrificing any of her own inclinations in order to retain him. Beth advised her taking the money into her own care, and settling wherever she chose; but Mabel would not listen to this.

"I cannot manage money affairs, and you know it. I should lose it all. I must have my money safe; but my letting him do that for me does not mean that I am going to slavishly submit to whatever he dictates. It is ungenerous to take such advantage of a woman."

The matter was a weary treadmill of reiterated assertions, questions, and lamentations; and Beth was completely at a loss as to what was best to be done. In lieu of anything better, she came to look upon the anticipated arrival of M. d'Isten as a relief. Her aunt was morbid, and perhaps she would recover her usual tone if her thoughts were transferred from herself to another for even a short space.

Beth's conscience, however, was not thoroughly easy about her part in bringing to pass this meeting. She knew her aunt was given to imprudent confidences, and Aunt Agatha had said when her sister had first written enthusiastically of M. d'Isten:

"Mabel gains less knowledge from experience than any

person I ever knew. At her age she ought to be wiser than to accept these Platonic friendships, which may end well, and may not,—probably not.”

Beth herself had not been at all prepossessed in the fine gentleman's favour, yet now she found herself almost glad he was coming. The present always in these days seemed the imperative thing to Bethesda.

Mrs. Trescott, on the other hand, was half sorry she had allowed him the privilege of seeing her, and looked forward to it as another wear and tear on her poor nerves, to which she was hardly equal.

“Supposing I tell you about it, and let him try and explain to you,” she even went so far as to say; but Beth stopped her right there.

“I could not think of that, Aunt Mabel; you know it would not be right. On the contrary, I am going down to Evra's to-night.”

“You sha'n't do any such thing!” asserted Mrs. Trescott imperiously.

“Wait a minute until I tell you why,” said Beth, smiling a little at the sudden explosion. “If you are going to have an explanation with M. d'Isten, I would be entirely *de trop*, and it would be awkward for all if I went away then.”

“You won't be *de trop*. I told him at the very beginning of our acquaintance that I didn't choose to have secrets. We can speak as easily before you as not. He will think you know all.”

“But since you have chosen to keep me in ignorance,” said Beth quietly, “I cannot consent to play a false part. I know nothing about your misunderstanding——”

“It wasn't a misunderstanding; it was an insult!”

“And you are going to receive him, Aunt Mabel! However, as I was saying, I know nothing about it, and you might speak easily before me, but he would not. Since you are going to allow him to explain, it is mere justice to let him have a fair opportunity. He would know that I was criticising him, and it could not help but be awkward.”

“Suppose you consider my feelings a little, instead of his altogether,” exclaimed Mabel testily.

Beth's eyes flashed, but she only said:

“So I do, in going away.”

"You entirely mistake what the explanation will be," said Mrs. Trescott in a less offensive tone, as she saw Beth's resolution. "There isn't a chance of his justifying himself, or making an adequate apology. At the most it will only be that we shall not remain angry,—although I don't even see how that can be."

"I will come back early, so as to relieve you if you need it."

"Then you are set upon going to Evra's?"

"If you please; for the first hour or so."

"You always have your own way," said Mabel, in a martyred tone. "Of course you will do as you like."

Beth found it very hard to do anything which would please her aunt these days. The only way she could hold herself at all upright was to think well before she spoke, and then not flinch from her decision. Her instinct was to veer with the desires of those around her, but it is impossible for a character of any consistency to adapt itself to the exigencies of a radically inconsistent nature; and this Beth was discovering.

Mrs. Trescott was looking particularly handsome when Beth left her. She had gone over the causes for offence which this man had given her until her anger was newly aroused, and she was prepared to meet him with biting frigidity. There was an extra pride in her carriage, and a brilliance to her eyes, which made Beth remember that one of her admirers had said he always made it a point to anger her occasionally, for the pleasure of studying her in a fury. Beth could recall twenty times at least, when just such a scene as this had been prepared because of some trifling circumstance which Mrs. Trescott had construed into a lack of respect. This was her most sensitive point. With tact, and constant remembrance of this peculiarity, one could coax or lead her unawares further than she knew; but, touch her sense of self-esteem by carelessness or intent, and she was instantly a-fire to avenge the insult. Only through appealing to her strong emotional temperament could such an error be retrieved, and even then the offence was not extinguished, but rather smouldered, ready to leap into flame if the slightest fault uncovered it.

Beth found Evra alone, and was greeted with the utmost delight.

"I shall always like this stranger for sending you to me this evening," she said. "Mamma has gone off to take a nap,

and we can have the cosiest time! But where did the man drop from? Paris? Well, they will have a fine time making up their quarrel. I don't think anybody would find it easy to approach Mrs. Trescott when she was vexed. And one never is quite sure of her. There are few one is. You are a rare pearl; I would trust you with anything, and know you would be my friend, sure and true, through it all."

"If I once believe, it is very hard for me to mistrust," replied Beth gravely. "I think you can rely upon me."

"And I know I can."

Evra was in an unusually entertaining mood that evening, and diversified her stories with snatches of new songs, which made the time fly. At last, to Beth's dismay, she heard the clock strike half-past ten. She sprang up, really annoyed at her thoughtlessness.

"I said I would be home early," she exclaimed. "It is too bad; I ought not to have stayed so long."

She threw her Algerian wrap around her as she spoke, and drew the hood over her head.

"You look like a white penitent in that," said Evra. "Don't grieve, dear. Mrs. Trescott has had her time occupied, I venture."

"Perhaps, but I ought not to have forgotten," replied Beth, in a tone that made Evra exclaim:

"Well, you are an exemplary child, and it shows your good heart, so I won't say a word more. Good-night."

Beth told the coachman to drive fast, and when they reached the house she ran upstairs swiftly, but stopped a moment at the door to regain her breath.

Not a sound was to be heard within, and, fearful that the stranger had gone, which would make her delinquency seem worse, she pushed open the door quickly.

A tall man, with a proud, dark head, was leaning against the mantel, half-facing her. His features were evidently under the *contre-coup* of some strong emotion. His eyes were resting on Mrs. Trescott, who sat in a low chair, her face buried in her handkerchief.

Every detail of the scene photographed itself as with flame on Beth's mind. She stood still a second in complete surprise. They apparently had not heard her enter, and the first instinct was to slip away unseen. Her second, which she followed, to

shut the door with sufficient noise to attract attention, and to walk quickly across the long room.

M. d'Isten started, and his attitude, his expression, his whole being seemed to change. He was only a deferential stranger by the time Beth reached her aunt. She laid her hand on Mabel's shoulder and said anxiously :

"Can I do anything for you, auntie?"

Mrs. Trescott glanced up with a flash of excitement in her eyes which soon dried their moisture.

"Oh, Beth!" she exclaimed, "René is my good friend again, my dear friend! He must be yours too. Greet him warmly, for I admire him——"

Her voice trembled and broke. She drew Beth forward to put her hand in his. The girl was completely mystified, and held back a minute. M. d'Isten stood by, making no effort to deprecate the warm words; but, looking up, Beth saw his face was lit by an expression of gratitude both manly and sincere.

She gave him her hand.

"My aunt's friends will, I hope, always be mine," she said.

He bowed profoundly, just touched her hand, and immediately took up his hat and gloves.

"Don't go yet," said Mabel. "I have not even offered you a pinch of salt. We must ratify our compact, as do your mother's race, or it may not hold."

"Then I shall surely stay," he replied, with that indescribable elegance of pronunciation which so fascinates those who can appreciate it.

Beth slipped away, to lay aside her snowy wrappings and to order cake and wine. She did not return until the servant entered with the tray. Mrs. Trescott and M. d'Isten seemed to have recovered something of their usual manner, although the gentleman was extremely quiet, and Mrs. Trescott never looked at him without an eloquent reminiscence in her eyes.

"Beth shall be our Hebe," she said; "she shall pour out the wine, and we will forget everything, to drink to our long friendship."

Beth obeyed her aunt in silence. The health was drunk solemnly, Beth taking a sip from her glass while watching the others. She was employing all her powers of discernment in quick scrutiny of this man.

He was pre-eminently aristocratic ; his manners were not only courteous, but courtly. He appeared reticent, in spite of a frank grace which was very attractive. Everything about him was fine, yet Beth had to acknowledge that there was no lack of strength. The lower part of his face was less developed than the upper portion, which was full of power, but the line from ear to chin was excellent ; decisive and lenient at the same time. As for the eyes, Beth only knew they were dark, for whenever she met them hers fell instantly. He was also studying her with close, if unobtrusive attention.

It seemed to result in little, however, for when he left there was no less coldness in her manner, and only a little added deference in his. He responded with deep appreciation to Mrs. Trescott's earnest wishes for a speedy return from Rome, and bent over her hand as if kindness had been rare to him.

"You must return before it is too warm," she said, "so that we can show you the sights. Beth and I know all the places worth seeing, and will gladly be your *ciceroni* ; won't we, Beth ?"

"Certainly."

"And do take board here ; it is so much pleasanter to have friends in the same house," continued Mrs. Trescott, who seemed only anxious to atone for past misunderstandings, and to prove that they were all forgotten.

"What can it mean ?" thought Beth. This entire reversal of circumstances bewildered her. It could only be explained by the consistency of inconsistency, as Mrs. Jameson terms such a character as Mabel Trescott's.

When the door closed Mrs. Trescott turned to Beth as if to claim her admiration ; but, seeing the lack of comprehension and the astonishment which Beth now allowed her face to express, she turned away, and walked up and down the room, thinking.

"So the explanation was satisfactory?" said Beth at last.

Before Mabel answered she put her arm around her niece and drew her into the promenade. They took a few turns in silence.

"Well?" said Beth presently. This lack of speech was as remarkable as the rest of it.

"I am trying to think what I can tell you. Most that he said was in confidence."

"Indeed!" remarked Beth, a trifle satirically.

"If you had been here it might have been—— But no; he would not have spoken then. Oh, Beth!" she cried, stopping suddenly, "when I think of what he has done, what he is doing now, to-night, I can unhesitatingly assert that his conduct is a lifelong act of self-control and magnanimity unequalled in history or fiction!"

Her eyes blazed superbly, and she stood erect, as if proud to be such a man's friend.

"That is high praise," said Beth. This was all mysterious, and her reason desired something more solid to satisfy it. Presently she asked:

"You are going to be friends again, now?"

"Of course we are! The best of friends! I admire him more than any man I ever knew. He is so true, and pure, and unselfish. You know nothing about it, Beth."

"I know I do not. If I am to meet him, can't you tell me how this great change in your opinions came about? Did he have any sufficient apology for what you called, only this afternoon, an insult?"

"I can't explain that without your knowing the whole. He could not himself. There was no explanation; he did not attempt to make any. But he begged my forgiveness with a sincerity and humility which no one could withstand. When he regretted his fault I could do nothing but forgive, could I?"

"I suppose not. But it was not this that made you so extremely cordial?"

"No; that was because of what he told me afterwards. I said, 'We will let bygones be bygones,' but I could not help feeling formal with him, and that hurt him. Finally he said, as if he had been thinking of it a long time, 'I must tell you what may palliate my error. I cannot go away feeling that the friendship you gave me has become cold;' and then he asked me to consider what he might tell me as a sacred confidence. I said, 'I never make promises,' but he trusted me, and told me. Oh, I wish I could tell you!"

Beth could not imagine a recital which would cause such a change, and she felt that her aunt was too prejudiced in the man's favour now, as she had before been against him, to be entirely trustworthy.

"I think I can tell you this much," resumed Mabel. "It

is relative to his wife, and he has acted in the noblest, the most disinterested way I ever could imagine."

She stopped, and laid her hand on the girl's arm to give full effect to her next words.

"Beth, you know I am generally on the woman's side, and that I have high ideas of what a man's duties are to his wife. Well, I tell you—I—that this man is an *ideal husband*."

"He told you this himself?" suggested the girl timidly.

"Yes, yes; I know," was the impatient reply; "but it is not from words I judge, only acts. He tried to keep himself in the background as much as he could. And, Beth, there was the ring of truth in it all; you could not mistrust him. Why, his face worked so with emotion that, after the first glance, I dared not look at him! It is the only time he has ever mentioned it, and you would have been overcome by the sound of suppressed suffering in his voice, just as I was."

Beth was considerably touched by her aunt's emotion at least.

"Why did he come here?" she said finally. "Is he going to stay in Italy long?"

"Why did he come? To consummate his act of sacrifice!" Her eyes fired anew at the thought. "He is going now to Rome to do what no other man would dream of doing. I can only admire him while I regret it. He told me it all. He has never had any one in whom to confide, and this was almost—— Why! it was like a dying confession. It is a question of life and death to him!"

The full lips began to tremble, and another outburst was imminent. Beth was startled by the last words, but said lightly:

"Take care, auntie; you will prejudice me against your friend again. I shall hate him if he is going to make you feel badly."

"It isn't that so much," said Mabel somewhat incoherently, "as because I was all used up before, with—with Agatha's letter. It seems as if love—never did—do any—good."

Beth passed her hand caressingly over the dark curls.

"Whatever this M. d'Isten may have had in his life, auntie dear," she said, "you have at least one heart which is devoted to you. Isn't that something?"

"Indeed it is," said Mabel, trying to recover herself. "You are all I have, Beth, but you are a great deal more than he is."

Beth went away in a few moments to her little study. Her mind was in confusion among all these tumultuous ideas, and her predominating thought was, that her dear auntie was preparing sorrow for herself.

"But what can I do?" she thought helplessly.

CHAPTER VII.

"Every spendthrift to passion is debtor to thought."

OWEN MEREDITH.

FOR the next few weeks Beth worried constantly about her aunt. She did not seem to recover from what had begun with her sister's letter any more at the end of a fortnight than she had the first day. The influence of M. d'Isten's visit had lasted only while he was present. She had fallen again into abject depression.

The intangibility of the affair was what routed every idea for bettering matters. Beth suggested that they should take a little trip through Northern Italy. No, Mabel would not hear of it. She would not deprive Beth of her lessons, at which, now, she had her last chance. It was a thing she must endure, she said, and one place was the same as another.

Beth coaxed her out on excursions through the beautiful spring land, with the fragrant air blowing in their faces, and the exquisite sky overhead. Mabel would seem to enjoy it while she was out, but came home to cry in a doleful manner, which made Beth feel hopeless.

"She must be going to have the fever," she said one day to Evra, in an extra hour of anxiety.

"If she does, mamma and I will take care of her; but it's much more likely you will have it, my pet, with those great circles growing under your eyes, and actual hollows coming in your cheeks. Do take care of yourself, darling."

"I only want to take care of auntie," replied the girl.

But still, finding herself impotent to do anything actively for her aunt, who preferred solitude, and shut herself into her room many hours alone, Beth allowed herself to be coaxed away oftener than she should have done. This, again, made

Mabel feel neglected, and so the trouble grew and grew, like a snowball rolled over innumerable times.

Mingled with this, and increasing it, was the state of affairs with Monsieur d'Isten.

At first Mabel had often talked of him, and would read aloud parts of the letters which she received frequently. They aroused Beth's interest by their style and language, but she felt the constraint of the secret between him and her aunt, and being obliged to take everything on trust where her disapproval had been excited and not allayed, could only be a spectator of the friendship. This Mrs. Trescott felt was cold and selfish, and gradually she came to not mentioning him, except when something directly occurred to introduce his name.

It was the first time that there had ever been any prolonged misunderstanding between Beth and her aunt, and they both felt it keenly. Each made valiant efforts to overcome it, but, after the first expansion, the result was always the same, for there was a mutual disapproval, and neither could give way. Now came the recognition that their principles were opposed. Mabel laid it all to Agatha's influence, and Beth knew it was the growth of her own individuality, and the fact that she held opinions which she would not allow to be melted into oil to make the wheels of life run smoothly.

When the answer came to Mrs. Trescott's passionate epistle, which she had, of course, sent, it showed the corresponding disappointment and sorrow on the other side; and Mrs. Trescott asserted that the sisterly bond which had united Agatha to her was broken for ever, and that there was nothing to be done but to accept the fact as an irreparable loss. If she could have had something to fight she would have grown strong with the necessity, but this sudden collapse of her past, present, and future, as she put it, left her nothing but despair.

"You must have patience with me, and let me adjust myself to circumstances as best I can," she would say to Beth drearily. "It is hard, hard, any way."

"The only way is to have them meet, and meantime give auntie something to do," thought the girl at last; and she determined to take the reins from her aunt's listless hands, and use all her influence to leave Florence, and start towards home

earlier. In Paris there would be the interminable shopping, and this would keep her aunt busy, and occupy her mind.

Whether Mrs. Trescott felt the relief of another's deciding for her, or saw the advisability of Beth's plan, and was glad of change, she yielded with little difficulty, and stipulated only that they should be in no hurry. She was willing to please Beth, but she could not get in a flurry; that would only be to make her ill.

Evra meantime felt somewhat hurt that her Lily did not respond more adequately to her devotion. Her love for Bethesda, who represented to her all that was uplifting, calm, and pure, was absorbing in its intensity. She wished the girl to feel and call her dearest, but Beth could not allow her to deceive herself with the thought an instant.

"My sister is the nearest to me," she said gravely. "I don't think I can love any one better than I do her. And then there is Aunt Mabel and Aunt Agatha. But, Evra, you are the dearest friend I have."

"*Friend!*" exclaimed the passionate woman, putting unutterable meanings in the word, and looking down on Beth from her superior height almost scornfully. But only for a moment. Then she would fall at her feet and cry out, as if in actual pain:

"Be my friend, Lily! Don't give me up! I can't lose you. My heart ached for you for years. Be my dear, wise, faithful friend."

"I will try," said Beth, distressed. "You know you can trust me, Evra, to be always your friend."

"I know it, I know it," sighed the artist. "I will try to be content."

All this pained Beth. She felt the weight of being loved unwisely, if not too well. She was coming to a vague conception of the difference between being idolised and idealised. One is slavery, the other freedom. One says: What you are now is to me perfection; I never wish you to alter or move. Let me bow down before you. This incases a living being in stone, and death inevitably ensues. The other says: I see great possibilities in you. You have the strength to develop them to their utmost. I trust in you. This gives the spirit wings, and the fullest life is the result.

Beth was feeling the restriction of her pedestal. It made

a very narrow platform. She was afraid to stir lest she should fall off, and to stand still was inimical to all growth. What could she do?

At last one day in April Beth came home from a ride with Evra, in which her aunt had not cared to join. She heard Mrs. Trescott's voice, in unusually gay tones, evidently conversing with callers. The door was open, however, and she could not slip by unperceived; so in her habit, with her hair considerably shaken by a brisk canter, she entered, to find herself confronted by that person before whom she someway especially wished to appear formal—Monsieur d'Isten.

He rose instantly, becoming grave as he did so; but Mabel exclaimed, laughing:

"Oh, you are caught, Beth! Never mind. Our good friend has taken us by surprise, hasn't he?"

By this time Bethesda had recovered her self-possession, and greeted the guest with quiet stateliness. In any guise she could appear both beautiful and dignified. Seating herself at some little distance she thought she would excuse herself in as short a time as politeness would allow; but during that period she discovered that her aunt was quite changed from her late self, and was brighter than she had seen her in a long time. M. d'Isten also seemed to have lost all his seriousness in Rome, and there was a continual play of words between the two which was pleasant to witness. Beth had a keen appreciation of wit, and found her severity melting under these clever hits.

"Perhaps it is just what auntie needs," she thought. "Some one she likes, and yet who is new to her. He may entertain her, and while they are going around Florence together I can spend these days freely with Evra."

And she went into luncheon more cordially disposed than she had cared to be before.

The conversation was about Rome, its wonders and its contrasts of ancient and modern life; not a new subject by any means, but Beth found herself often surprised by some quiet originality, some sure criticism, or a turn of thought which presented the matter in a broader light, and connected it subtly with many diverging facts.

Mrs. Trescott seemed delighted.

"Stay a fortnight," she said to her entertaining friend, "and we will have some charming days. This is just the

time to see Florence. There is nothing so lovely as an Italian spring, is there?"

"I can hardly admit that," answered M. d'Isten. "My own land is in the south, you know, and what is familiar is always most beautiful. And we have the sea."

"Oh yes; I had forgotten your devotion to that. Beth can sympathise with you there. She finds nothing so grand as the ocean."

"Mademoiselle is surely right," he said, glancing at her with a veiled curiosity. This reserved maiden was a new study to him. "If you like the sea, mademoiselle," he added, addressing her directly for almost the first time, "I am convinced you would find N—— charming."

"Did you say it was in the Pyrenees, monsieur?" she asked with interest. "I have always wished to travel there."

"It is the most beautiful corner in the whole range," he replied, his face lighting. "Imagine a valley opening at the south to the sea, with lofty peaks rising at the north and east, and a long spur extending into the water at the west. It ends in an abrupt cliff, where the waves always dash high, even in the calmest weather. That is where I intend to build my castle," he added, turning with a smile to Mrs. Trescott.

"Yes? Well I hope you will finish it by the time we go there. We certainly must some day. And now let us plan about what we are going to do here."

Beth noticed the slight shade that fell again upon M. d'Isten's face.

"Why doesn't auntie lend herself to his mood?" she wondered. "He must be very fond of his home, and that is always a good trait in a man; but I thought he was from Algeria."

At this point she was appealed to by her aunt.

"I suppose you are too tired, Beth, to go out this afternoon? So we will put off our drive to Fiesole until to-morrow."

"Oh, don't wait for me," said Beth quickly. "This will be a lovely afternoon for the view. You had better not postpone it."

"Indeed we will. It would not be half the pleasure without her, would it, René?"

"Mademoiselle's presence would necessarily enhance our pleasure; but she may not desire——"

"She is always delighted with driving," interrupted Mabel. "And she can tell you a great deal more than I can about all the things you will see. So we will consider it settled for tomorrow at three, if convenient to you."

"I am entirely at your command," said M. d'Isten; and Beth acquiesced silently.

She was not going to be tied to entertaining this man, however, she told herself. She wanted to be with Evra; and he was her aunt's friend, not hers. Besides, she was not attracted by him. He was a refined and cultured man, undoubtedly; he might be wonderfully noble—she knew nothing about that; but there was something hard about his eyes—it had disappeared for an instant when he mentioned his home—and he was self-conscious, she thought, in his very self-forgetfulness, as if that were a duty and not a spontaneous impulse. He lacked fire, she decided, and she never did like a man who failed in warmth.

At this juncture she glanced up, but met his eyes, and hers instantly fell.

What flash of comprehension was there in his face? Had he read her thoughts? In any case it rebuked her. Was her penetration so sure that she should condemn a man on that hasty proof alone? There was no call for her to plunge into the depths and discover all the hidden meanings of his physiognomy. He was her aunt's friend, and all she had to do with him was to be grateful for his rescuing Mrs. Trescott from the slough of despond.

When he held the door open for her to pass out she smiled up at him and said:

"My aunt is already brightened by your coming. She has not been well, and the pleasure of showing Florence to you will benefit her, I am sure."

"She will confer upon me a great favour if she can make me of use. I thank you for suggesting the possibility, mademoiselle," he replied, with a politeness as impersonal as her own.

During the next few days Mrs Trescott thought of nothing, to all appearance, but to *fêter* M. d'Isten.

"He has had such a sad life," she would say to Beth, "that I want to make this time as pleasant as possible to him—a kind of oasis in his life."

"Does she never think," remarked Evra one day, when Mabel had left them with some such words still echoing in the air, "that she may make it too pleasant for him?"

"I don't think there can be any danger of that," replied Beth gravely. "Aunt Mabel is always most sensitive to any such possibility. You see she is nine years older than he is."

"That may be; but it is none of my business. And you, certainly, are not over cordial to him. Don't you like him, dear?"

"I hardly know him," said Beth, a little troubled. "He seems to be more pleasant than ordinary acquaintances one makes, and yet——"

"I understand. Don't let's bother over him any more. You and I are enough for one another, aren't we, sweet?"

The truth was, they were too much absorbed in one another. It annoyed Mrs. Trescott.

"You don't pay any attention to my friend," she cried one day, in a fit of exasperation. "I am much more cordial with your friend than you are with mine. How would you like it if I avoided Evra, and were cold with her, as you are with M. d'Isten? You would think me very unkind and hard."

"Excuse me, Aunt Mabel, but it is not the same. You like Evra for herself; I do not like M. d'Isten."

"*Why* don't you like him, then? It is mere prejudice, of which you ought to be ashamed."

"It is a prejudice you gave me."

"I have wiped all that out. I have forgiven it. What is it to you? You don't even know what was the matter. If you met him in an ordinary way you would have to take him on trust—as I did when I first met him."

"Then my aunt would not have told me he had 'insulted' her."

"*Don't* say that! It is altogether too strong a word any way. And since you know nothing about it, and I do, and I know him and his whole life, can't you believe me when I tell you he is noble and well worthy any woman's friendship?"

"I can take him as your friend on that, which is what I have tried to do."

"It is only as my friend that I wish you to take him; but, instead of being cordial for my sake, you treat him more coldly than you do any one else."

"I did not mean to. I am sorry if I appeared to do so. I am ill at ease with him ; he does not appeal to me at all ; I suppose that is the trouble."

"At any rate, you might treat him with ordinary courtesy," exclaimed Mabel.

"I think even he, who is certainly most courteous, would say I am never otherwise," replied Bethesda proudly, and went away.

She took herself to task, however, when the heat of this little passage had evaporated, for she was almost morbidly sensitive to rebuke. Why did not she like him ? He was in many respects what she most admired, as her aunt often insisted ; *distingué*, intelligent, and cultivated ; an admirable conversationalist, and quick in mind, but—— Well, he did not touch her. She could not like a person who was unsympathetic to her, but she would try still more to be cordial to him on her aunt's account. Yet she was determined not to let it interfere with being a large part of her time with Evra. The girl knew that the artist's career Guinevere had chosen was full of trial, because in voicing the emotions she stirred all that portion of her nature condemned to silence. Bethesda understood that she was interposed between the artist's triumph and the woman's grief. She, and she alone, could be the instrument to respond to every touch of Guinevere's complex nature, and unite them in harmonious accord. Was this to be given up for the sake of being constantly with M. d'Isten ? No indeed !

The next morning, however, a riding party was formed, in which all joined. It was a perfect day, with a cool breeze blowing over the blossoming orchards, and as they entered the carriage to drive around for Evra, Beth had the brightness of anticipated pleasure in her face, and was more natural than she had ever been with M. d'Isten present.

He did not fancy ladies riding. Amazons did not appeal to his keen sense of the womanly, and Beth was very well aware of the fact. She had tried to avoid the party from her natural dislike to doing anything another did not find pleasurable ; but Mrs. Trescott was longing for a gallop, and thought that in the informality of an excursion Beth and René might break through the dignified reticence which separated them ; so she insisted, and Beth was now silently defying with a gay heart the equally silent disapproval of his lordship.

When they reached Mrs. Conover's, however, and Beth went in through the sunshine that flooded the southern archway, her violet habit outlining the rounded figure to perfection, and the long plumes of her velvet cap mingling with the solid coils of bronze hair, he could not help admitting that a true woman will be womanly in any position. He turned to Mrs. Trescott with the first compliment for Beth that he had ever uttered.

"Your niece, madame," he said deliberately, "is one of the most exquisite of women."

"I knew you would like her!" exclaimed Mabel triumphantly. "Even your difficult taste would be conquered by her. She said you would be bored by the riding, but I told her you would find her and Miss Conover so charming *en amazone* that you could not be bored."

"Certainly not,—with you," he replied courteously, but Miss Hamilton's quick intuition did not escape him.

In a few moments the two girls reappeared, Miss Conover a very Diana in her green dress, with golden curls breaking out from under the stiff English hat, and shortly after they had reached the four horses awaiting them with the grooms outside the Cascine gates.

They had planned to go to a villa and chapel off towards the sea-coast, where the views and works of art were alike beautiful. To reach it they could pass through the Cascine and strike off across the meadows, and all were in the mood for a rustic day.

The *bijou* park looked irresistibly lovely as they entered it. A quadruple avenue of trees arched feathery branches overhead in a tangle of fine lines against the deep sky. At one side of the carriage-way was a grassy space shaded by live oaks intertwined with ivy, now fresh with tender green. A bridle-path ran parallel with the road, and on the outer side was a wide ditch separating the park from a meadow where troops were practising military manœuvres. Beyond were the villa-dotted mountains rising in purple beauty to where the snow crowned them with brilliants.

It was an exquisite scene, and the soft charm of spring-time was hushing while it thrilled every nerve. Beth had fallen into silence, and was recalling that day beneath Michel Angelo's great David, when it seemed as if each breath of

air were striving to tell her a message, when suddenly she heard a smothered exclamation, and, looking back, saw Nero, Mrs. Trescott's horse, rearing and pawing the air, while M. d'Isten's bay had started aside with a snort of terror.

Before Mabel could regain control of her obstreperous steed he had faced about, made a rush across the road, and, springing high, leaped hedge and ditch, to land several feet beyond on the turf of the meadow.

Mrs. Trescott was a woman of great courage, and when Nero came to the ground, although she looked a little pale, she nodded reassuringly to the breathless group above, and let him scour off with her across the plain, into the very midst, as it seemed, of the drilling regiments. The black-robed lady, who rode so well, would be somewhat of a surprise as an impromptu visitor on the scene of action.

"Do go after her!" exclaimed Beth, appealing to M. d'Isten. He had already turned to do so, and now, putting spurs to his horse, took the ditch, and in a few moments Evra and Beth saw him gaining on Mrs. Trescott's curveting beast, which some officers had headed off.

"It is not a bad joke to have your disapproving monsieur obliged to go after Mrs. Trescott in such a scrape," said Evra, laughing, as they put their horses to a trot.

"He doesn't ride badly, though, does he?"

"Well enough," answered Evra carelessly; "but, I say, Mrs. Trescott does know how to keep her seat! That was a stiff jump, and you aren't accustomed to such things in America, are you?"

"No; auntie learned to ride on an unbroken colt, but it was never at hurdles! She ought not to ride that horse, or else she should have him obey her. I don't believe in half-way measures myself."

"Nor I. The measures you have used with Major meet with my approval. He is as spirited a horse as Nero, yet he obeys every touch on the rein."

"An Englishman taught me to ride, you know," answered Beth, with a glance of amusement at Evra, who was not a little jealous of Clarence.

"But you were a born rider, witch!"

"Oh, I beg your pardon. You should have seen me going up Vesuvius on horseback at night during an eruption. It was

the first time I had ever mounted anything but a donkey, and wasn't I frightened! You can't think what a coward I used to be about horses. That was what made me so anxious to ride. I never could bear to have any weakness stronger than I. It makes me ashamed until I can afford to laugh at it from the safe side of triumph."

"I am sure no one would dream of accusing you of being a coward, and I don't believe you ever were. You have not one whit of anything but bravery in you. And anyway, if you ever were timid with horses, it's all the more credit for you to be so fearless now. So you see, darling, anyhow you can fix it, you are my perfect, spotless Lily."

"Don't say that!" exclaimed Beth hastily. "You don't know how—how afraid I feel when you talk so."

"Afraid, childie?"

"Yes, as one feels on a dizzy height. I am always afraid of falling."

"Pshaw, dear; you won't fall."

They had now crossed the Piazza, bordered by glistening magnolias, and entered the wilder portion of the Cascine. Here nature had not been disturbed. Great branching ivies draped the budding trees, which were knee-deep in underbrush and earth-loving vines. Looking into this forest, one fancied oneself a hundred miles from any habitation, and the constant twitter and occasional jubilant songs of birds favoured the delusion. In some more open spots myrtle blossoms made the ground like "a bit of the sky, fallen through from on high," as Beth quoted softly, and Evra immediately beckoned to the groom to pick some.

They had each a cluster of long sprays, mingled with white violets, before their sylvan solitude was interrupted. Then, happening to glance toward the end of the arcade, Beth saw two equestrian figures outlined like statues against the sunny atmosphere beyond. Both tall, slender, and graceful, they were immediately recognised; but it was only for a moment that they remained thus in the light, photographing a picture on Beth's mind; then they entered the shadow of the glade, and soon overtook the pastoral couple.

"What are you doing here?" exclaimed Mabel as they came up.

"Picking myrtle," answered Evra, holding up the swaying bouquet.

"During interludes of gathering laurels," remarked M. d'Isten quietly.

"Merci, monsieur," said Evra, smiling, "I see you rescued our distressed lady!"

"Oh, I wasn't at all in distress," cried Mrs. Trescott. "You are not to flatter him at my expense, you know. But I confess I was glad to have a friend by me, among all those officers. They were very polite, though. Quite an adventure, wasn't it?"

"One can always be sure you will entrap an adventure if there is one possible," said Evra, laughing. "Beth and I will have to chaperon you, as she says."

Beth had not spoken since they came up, but as they now all naturally turned towards her she said abruptly:

"Let us go on; we are late," and started forward. "I am sure I don't know what it is," she exclaimed impatiently to Evra, as they rode on, "but I am actually growing to dislike this friend of auntie's."

"I cannot see any reason why you should, dear. He is a gentleman in every sense of the word, and he really wishes to become acquainted with you. Give him a chance. It is not like my 'just judge' to condemn a man unheard, and you are always so cold and dignified with him, he cannot approach you."

"You think I am at fault with him, then?"

"You could not lack in courtesy to any one, if you mean that; but you might be a little less severely haughty with him. He seems to be everything one could ask."

"But he is not *simpatico*, and—don't let's talk of him any more."

However, this conversation had some effect upon Beth. It was easy for her to be pliant to others' wills when they were not dictatorial; so, during the excursion she allowed Evra to fall back with Mrs. Trescott, and tried to be more freely receptive of M. d'Isten's courteous advances. Presently she found it was not so hard as at first, and that he really entertained her.

They talked of life in Algeria. He was charmed with her interest, and she was delighted to hear one familiar with it speak of a country which exerted a strange fascination over her.

"You were born there, monsieur?"

"Yes, when my mother was hardly sixteen. They marry young in the South."

"But if Algeria is your native country, how is it you come to speak so affectionately of the Pyrenees?"

"Ah, that is the home of my ancestors. The place where one's own little life comes into existence has small claims compared with that where fathers and grandfathers have been born and died."

"It seems unfortunate that one who appreciates such a home should not date his own birth from there."

"My mother had a great antipathy to France," replied M. d'Isten quietly. "She was devoted to her own land."

"I should have been in her place," remarked Beth carelessly. He flashed a penetrating glance across her.

"Pardon me, mademoiselle, if I doubt that."

"Ah!" said Beth, a little startled; "you think one would not like Algeria?"

"I did not mean that; it was not a question of places. You might love your own free land, for instance, mademoiselle, but there are other things to which you would sacrifice it."

He spoke in a tone of quiet assurance which amused Beth.

"You trust much to your impressions, I see."

"To what else than his perceptions can a person trust in character?"

"To experience, most would say."

"I am glad you add that. It is unnecessary for me to point out to you that if one waits for experience to judge character, one's opportunities fly by like those birds across the sky."

"And if one trusts to one's impressions, and they are incorrect?" said Beth half reluctantly.

"They should not be," was the prompt reply.

"You have caught yourself there!" thought Beth, with a sudden flash in her eyes.

"Nay," he answered, with that quick reading which to Beth seemed miraculous; "one who judges from impressions must be sure of what and why the impressions are. Vagueness is injustice."

Beth gave her horse an impatient touch of the whip. Why should she be thus dissected, and why should he presume to instruct her? But presently he rode beside her again,

calling her attention to some unnoticed beauty in the landscape with so sympathetic a manner that she soon allowed herself to be disarmed.

Later, when they arrived at their destination, the far-reaching views seemed to touch both M. d'Isten and Beth in a kindred spirit, and the works of art in the marble chapel, built in commemoration of "a Laura dearer than Petrarch's," appealed to the same sensitive sense in each. Thus a truer comprehension quietly built its foundations beneath them, and there was hung by imperceptible threads a bridge over the icy stream that had heretofore separated them.

CHAPTER VIII.

"The most powerful feeling with a liturgy is the prayer which seeks for nothing in especial, but is a yearning to escape from the limitations of our own weakness, and an invocation of all good to enter and abide with us."—*Daniel Deronda*.

"Only I discern
Infinite passion, and the pain
Of finite hearts that yearn."

ROBERT BROWNING.

It had been arranged that after their return from their ride Mrs. Trescott and Beth should go to the representation of a French drama, given by an excellent company, with M. d'Isten.

Evra could not go, as she was to sing the next night, and did not wish to get the bad air of the theatre into her throat. Great was the surprise of all, therefore, when Miss Conover made her appearance in handsome toilette just as the others were about to start.

"You have changed your mind? I am so glad!" exclaimed Beth, hastening to welcome her friend. But she found there was unusual cause for this change when her hand was almost crushed in a fierce grasp.

"What is the matter?" she asked, alarmed by Evra's manner, and the defiant light in her eyes.

"Nothing!" said Guinevere abruptly. "I am going to Milan to-morrow, and I *would* be with you to-night."

"To Milan! Why, you are advertised to sing!" said Mrs. Trescott.

"I know, but everything is upset. A telegram calls me to Milan. There is no putting it off."

"I hope it is not bad news?"

"Bad enough, and I want to forget it!" exclaimed Evra, drawing Beth's arm through hers. "I beg your pardon, Mrs. Trescott, but I am so angry I can hardly speak. You will forgive me? Thanks. Now, shan't we go down? I did not intend to detain you."

As the three women passed M. d'Isten, who held aside the *portière*, he classed them instantly. The airy, languid grace and sudden energy of Mrs. Trescott; that, he knew well. The passionate intensity of the artist; that he was already weary of. The delicate sympathy and reliance of Miss Hamilton:

"I must know her," he decided quietly, and it should be admitted that he did not adequately regret Miss Conover's near departure.

The next day, when Beth went down to stay with her friend and see her off, she heard the news. It was of a character to depress any one.

The man to whom Evra had been engaged and later refused, was taking a manly revenge by endeavouring to shut off her opportunities in London, spending his money with a lavish hand in the praiseworthy endeavour. It would retard the artist for years, wasting precious time, if he should succeed, and her former *maestro* had telegraphed her to come immediately if she wished to foil the machinations. There was no choice possible, so she had paid the forfeit to the Florentine *impresario*, had been obliged to forego her benefit, and all because she had refused to marry a man whose actions made her despise him.

"But aren't you glad you are free?" exclaimed Beth, when Guinevere thus ended the story.

"Ah, for that, yes! But shouldn't I have led him a pretty life when all this fine character came out after marriage? He wouldn't have had an easy time of it, you better believe!"

"And you would have had a horrible life! Imagine being bound to such a person! Oh, I am so thankful for you! After all, this is a small price to pay for your freedom."

"Hum! To-day I would be almost willing to be 'bound' to him for the pleasure of tormenting him. He wouldn't find life a bed of down, you may rest assured! But there; I am talking nonsense," she said, pulling herself up short, as she

noticed the pained expression on Beth's face. She stopped packing, and came to take Beth's hands.

"Do you know, child, what makes me feel this more than all is the leaving you. I can't bear to go away from you. It tears my heart."

There was a tone of intense emotion in her voice which almost frightened Beth. Evra was scanning her face with wild eyes. After a moment she said, in suppressed tones :

"You like me, you are fond of me ; all in your cool lily-like way. And what are you to me ?" She snatched the girl into a suffocating embrace. "You are my dearest on earth. I thought this power of loving any human being was killed in me. I could have sworn there was no one in the whole world who could ever hold my heart as you do. I tell you, child, it is tearing my heart out to leave you. I may never find you the same. No, you need not protest. I know I am a friend to you—a dear friend—if you like ; but you are inexpressibly more than a friend to me. You are all the love I have in the world ; all I can give or take. You are my heart itself !"

"What can I say, dear Evra ?" began Beth, but the artist interrupted her passionately.

"There it is ! You ask, 'What can I say ?' while I speak and find words only too poor ! I know you can't help it ; you *don't* feel as I do, and that is the despair of it. Yet you will love some day. It is not that you lack passion ; it is all slumbering within you ; and when it is awakened—oh, shan't I be jealous ?"

She pushed the girl away almost roughly, and returned to her trunk. Beth did not know what to do. This intense love weighed upon her heavily. She did not feel Evra supreme, nor did she desire to do so. And yet she was so sorry for Evra, so grieved that she could not give all that was asked of her, that she almost blamed herself.

Thus it had gone on in alternations of passionate outbursts and constraint all day. Evra would not let Beth out of her sight, and Beth wished to do everything she could to please her, and remained with her until the train left.

It was with a sigh of mingled relief and depression that she turned away from the station. This absorption was wearying, and yet the world seemed cold without it.

"If I ever find a man who loves me like that, and whom I

can love——” But the thought would not be completed. “Of course it is impossible,” she said aloud severely; and then she had reached the house and found everything lonely and chill. She could hear her aunt’s voice and M. d’Isten’s in the parlour, but the sound only made her more lonely. The rooms were dark; heavy clouds had obscured the sunset, and the twilight was fast fading into night. It was too warm for a fire, but the threatening rain chilled the air. Everything seemed dreary and cold; and her sympathy for Evra emphasised her own feelings until she felt very near the region of tears.

But this would never do! She was not a woman who appreciated the luxury of a “good cry;” so now she sprang to her feet and lit the candles, casting about her for a new thought. The first rays revealed a book lying on the table. It was *Bones and I*, a weird favourite of hers. With a momentary hesitation she opened it and read:

“You talk of suffering being pure waste; I tell you it is all pure gain. You talk of self being the motive to exertion; I tell you it is the abnegation of self which has wrought out all that is noble, all that is good and useful, and nearly all that is ornamental in the world. It is not the dreamer, wrapped in his fancied bliss, from whom you are to expect heroic efforts, either of mind or body. Wake the dreamer roughly; drive spurs and goad into his heart. He will wince, and writhe, and roll, and gnash his teeth, but I defy him to keep still. He must be up and doing from sheer tortures, flying to one remedy after another, till he gets to work, and so finds distraction, solace, presently comfort; and, after a while, looking yet higher, hope, happiness, reward.”

Beth stopped and looked out into the darkening garden, where a few dim stars were striving to pierce a rainy mist. There would come a time, she knew, when these words would be throbbing truth to her; when the thought of the book would be unendurable, because she, too, would be going through the mill.

She sat thinking a long time. In the play the night before an innocent man had accused himself of murder to save an innocent friend and the honour of the woman he loved. Beth felt the power within her to do something of the kind. She was hungry, not to be loved, but to love. She wanted some one on whom she could pour out the whole wealth of her affec-

tion, and not feel that it had been wasted, but given to the highest use. She believed she could walk to the stake steadily, proudly, for one thus dear to her, or for what she knew was right.

There was no danger of tears now. Heroism, even in thought, blots out the possibility of such weakness.

The next day was Sunday. Mrs. Trescott went to church alone, to the American chapel, where a "union" service was held, supposed to unite all the sects for a time at least under the national flag. Beth did not wish to accompany her, and her aunt let her do as she liked. She had always made a principle of this in religious matters. She was a Unitarian herself, and believed, as she said, in freedom to worship God.

In the present age any thought makes room for a million doubts, and these had attacked both Margaret and Bethesda as soon as they were old enough to understand anything but obedience to custom. Margaret became involved in the toils of that false philosophy which cramps through making tests for the spirit by material things. It was only after years of struggle and desperation that she found relegating things and thoughts to their true places brought her peace, and learned to lift herself from independence of thought to true knowledge and dependence on the love of God.

Bethesda was quite her opposite in temperament. Margaret had to be convinced before she would yield her opinions one jot; Beth obeyed instinctively. Everything in Margaret's nature had been drawn from chaos, as it were, and consciously formed into a rounded world; Beth's was a sphere launched into space with only its orbit to discover. But Margaret was steadfast to her central sun, while Beth was drawn hither and thither by the attraction of different planets, and had no definite aim. She had been accustomed from infancy to hear of her sweetness of character as much as her lovely face, and she rested in the assurance of one as of the other, thinking it unnecessary to cultivate either.

The trials and temptations of a lovable temperament, as it is usually termed, are not, as a rule, understood. We are apt to think that such persons have no difficulties to solve, no struggles to undergo. To them we say everything comes rose-coloured and perfumed; it is no task to them to be good. But this is a mistake. Such natures have an inevitable tendency to weakness. They lack that conscious principle, formed by

sturdy endeavour, which is the only enduring cement of a worthy character. They are liable to the error of considering their instincts, generally true, an infallible guide, or of following blindly the guiding hand of one they have been accustomed to depend upon. Just because they are equally developed on many sides they are subject to many attractions which draw them from their individual orbit. They are sensitive to influences, and yield with a plasticity which makes them take on different forms as well as colours until they are insecure of their own.

Bethesda had partially recognised these errors during her illness. It had been a serious period to her. For the first time she had comprehended that to stand erect, not to be carried, or to lean, is of vital importance to integrity.

In the recognition of self-responsibility she had found the hollowness of her childish faith. It was as empty to her as one of her china dolls, and she cast it from her as she would any lifeless illusion of childhood. But the loss of the symbol left her with nothing to take its place. The idea of religion was a blank to her. A habit, a vague sense of something others knew about and she would experience some time, was all religion had been to her; and now her awakened mind would not be lulled by imagination or any hereditary faith. She had a strong feeling, not altogether unshared by greater minds, that some new revelation was at hand; that this was the eve of a transforming era; and she took a certain pride in holding herself undefiled for that new religion. She must see now, and clearly, to believe, and meantime the highest she could apprehend was her own perception of right.

In this state of mind formal churchgoing was a mockery to her; she shrank from it as hypocrisy; and Mrs. Trescott left her behind with a comfortable conviction that these worries had to come to any one with brains, and that some time Beth would waken and discover the world knew more than she did, in spite of her foolish dream.

But it was very real to Beth, and to still her uneasy craving she would dress as inconspicuously as possible, and, with the faithful Assunta on guard beside her, walk or drive swiftly to the Santissima Annunziata, or Dante's Santa Croce, and give herself up to the æsthetic religion which was now her refuge.

George Sand writes that her grandmother on her deathbed

said solemnly : "J'ai toujours cru en Dieu, mais écoute ceci, ma fille, je ne l'ai pas assez aimé." With Bethesda, up to this time, it might have been said that she always loved God, but she did not sufficiently believe in him. Her nature was always going out blindly towards some perfection which she could worship, to some absolute power which should be *sure*. She was empty, as it were, and the first feelings of hunger, a vague pain, a faintness, a desire for she knew not what, made themselves felt. She tried to find something to satisfy her—something to quell that indistinct disease which intuition told her was dangerous. Morally, her conscience was a staff whose soundness she did not doubt; but mankind, and particularly womankind, feel the need of something besides morality to fill their lives—something beyond and above it. A noble nature is essentially a hero-worshipper; and if it has not a real, and eternal, and absolute hero to worship, it will find a great temptation to throw itself at the feet of this or that idol as the better, if not the best.

Happily, Bethesda had too natural a cleaving to the unalterable and highest *best* for her to yield to this temptation. When she believed, it must be in something verifiable, something which would appeal to a higher court than that of the senses or the emotions—to that highest of all, which dwarfs suffering, hushes complaint, and gives one strength to bear all, and rejoice in the bearing.

Meantime she stood alone.

As she came out of church, half envying Assunta, who was wiping her eyes beside her—she had been praying that her dearest signora might be admitted into the holy Church—Monsieur d'Isten quietly stepped to her side. She shrank, just perceptibly, in recognising him. She had had no idea he was in the church. She was not at all aware that he had been watching her with that keen discernment which was one of his most marked characteristics. She felt a certain shock of intrusion in his presence which she tried to cover instantly; but he, of course, had seen it.

He accompanied her to the carriage, speaking only a few grave words by the way, and when she turned to ask him to join her found him already lifting his hat as he moved swiftly away. She admired his quick perception, and yet it annoyed her. She scolded herself roundly. She had been rude—and to him!

CHAPTER IX.

"Our sympathy is a gift we can never know, nor when we impart it. The instant of communion is when, for the least point of time, we cease to oscillate, and coincide in rest by as true a point as a star pierces the firmament."—THOREAU.

"Sympathy, viewed from the passive side, on the active side is called benevolence."—W. H. MALLOCK.

RENÉ D'ISTEN'S character was of an essentially foreign quality. The courts and customs of Europe educate persons in a school entirely different from any American's experience, and it is difficult for them to gain just impressions of the Latin mind.

Mrs. Trescott understood him only superficially. She recognised him as a refined and courteous aristocrat, with a republican liberality; a remarkable uniting of frankness and reserve, of cordiality and distinction. Further, into the motives of his life, the causes of these results, she did not look, unless during the time when she was under the vivid influence of the secret he had confided to her.

Bethesda was more of a psychologist, but only an intuitive one. There was much to admire in him. His mind was as well-poised as his head, and there was a firmness of steel in his decisions as in his muscles. He was keenly appreciative of sentiment, while the hazy raptures of sentimentality disappeared like mists under the sunlight of his clear mind. He had a marvellous amount of tact, and his perceptions were acute; not a quiver of sensitive lips escaped him, nor the subtlest tremor of thought.

Bethesda also apprehended instinctively a certain wariness and suppleness of mind; a duality in the man, which, when she was out from under his direct influence, confused and blurred her impressions. Not that he was insincere—his ardent devotion to certain causes and persons barred such suspicions—but she was aware that he exercised a self-control, which had become a second nature, and presented himself to the world only as he wished to be seen. Who could tell, then, where this ended and his real self began?

Now this duality, which Bethesda did not justly understand, is peculiarly European. The intrigue of society nur-

tures the man from his cradle. He is taught self-control and tact before he is taught frankness and truth, and, when after-life builds a superstructure, one cannot be sure on which foundation it has its basis. In any case, the man is dual; he has two selves; one that he himself knows, or thinks he knows, and one that the world thinks it knows. These intermix and fuse their qualities so dexterously that finally no one can say which is the body, so to speak, and which the spirit; they are quite as interactive as this problem of the philosopher's. The individual, meanwhile, is neither one nor the other: he is actually both.

M. d'Isten had used many of the qualities of both sides of his nature in his acquaintance with Mabel Trescott. She was proud of her power to make persons feel insecure of her, and between her and M. d'Isten there had been a continual warfare, in which now one, now the other, was conquered and conqueror. On the whole, however, M. d'Isten triumphed. He had patience, as well as versatility, and his will-power was a carefully developed capacity, in which he had received much training from himself and others, while Mabel's was capricious and inconstant. She delighted as much in giving full blossoms, when green buds alone were expected, as in giving a thorn-prick when one bent to inhale a tropical fragrance. And René d'Isten knew how to receive the flower with grace no less well than he knew how to avoid the thorns, and after their reconciliation he had secured himself in her friendship, she hardly knew how, but much more decidedly than before.

This left him comparatively free to follow up his resolve of knowing more of Miss Hamilton, and Mrs. Trescott was very willing to aid him. Bethesda herself was passive in their hands. The sudden separation from her friend, who had engrossed the girl to an almost exhausting degree, left her in a subdued and listless state of mind. The approaching farewell to the scenes she loved, to Italy, and the life she had lived there, gave a tinge of wistful sadness to all her thoughts; and the enervating influence of an Italian spring made her yield to her aunt unquestioningly, drifting with the stream of her desires.

Thus they were either driving through the still air, looking on scenes of rarest loveliness, or visiting churches filled with the art of centuries, and mystically solemnised by the glamour

of a symbolic religion, or sitting in their own shadowy parlour, talking and listening to gradual unfoldings of character.

What wonder, then, that M. d'Isten, with his thorough *savoir-faire*, was able to make the barrier of prejudice crumble away unnoticed? He knew how to impress himself upon Bethesda's mind by imperceptible means that could arouse no surprise or even recognition. He talked to her no more than formerly, but in his conversations with her aunt he allowed his inner nature to come to the surface, and show itself in a thousand delicate ways, which could not but win attention from one so sensitive to all refinement as Bethesda.

One afternoon, the day before their projected departure from Florence, whence they were to go to Paris in company, they came up from luncheon a little wearied by the exertion of packing on a warm day. Bethesda seated herself by the shaded window to enjoy the jessamine and tiny cream roses which wreathed it in a multitude of delicate lines. The outline of her face and figure was cut clearly against the dark-blue damask, while an eager ray of sunlight found and rested on the bronzed gold of her hair. Mrs. Trescott threw herself on an ottoman near by, and leaned her head against Beth's knee. The girl idly broke off clusters of the rose-vine, and weaved them in among her aunt's dark curls.

M. d'Isten paced the room in a silent mood of repressed excitement. The languor of a southern mid-day, the surroundings of the beautiful room, the atmosphere of domestic womanliness, threw a charm around the group to which this man was almost painfully sensible.

"I wish you could have known my mother," he said abruptly. "I often feel as if she knew you."

Mabel looked up in surprise, while Beth said simply:

"Tell us about her."

It was a subject on which he seldom spoke, but it was becoming no new thing for him to give expression to ideas and feelings that had previously been unspoken. Now he answered as simply as he had been asked.

"You know she was an *Orientale*. Her father was a man of great influence in Algiers, and she was his favourite child. She was educated as few Eastern women are even when my father married her, and she was then, as I told you, mademoiselle, only fifteen. She was very beautiful. My father took

her to Paris soon after they were married, but he returned with her to Algiers quickly. She disliked Paris, and the attention she attracted there seemed to hurt her. It made her shrink and wince. She was essentially Eastern," he went on, twining a jessamine wreath slowly around his hand; "her nature had the grace and warmth of the tropics. Her very soul was given to my father, and yet I have heard him say that she inspired him with a reverence that made him feel afar off at times. Some women seem to reach higher than any man can."

He paused a moment, and his mind appeared to be absent from his surroundings. Neither of the ladies spoke. Presently he said:

"My father, too, was very young when he married. He did not realise that he would be giving up his country in marrying an Algerian. But when he found she would be unhappy elsewhere he made the sacrifice quietly. Perhaps no one knew what a sacrifice it must have been so well as I."

"Your father and mother were a great contrast to one another, were they not?" asked Beth.

"Markedly so. He is reserved and quiet, and has an iron will. He is somewhat cold also, but a man must not show too much feeling. You see, he is quite my ideal," he added, smiling.

"A Bayard, Beth once called him," said Mabel teasingly.

The words recalled, as by magic, the conversation in the train between Genoa and Florence, and Beth was silent, thinking how strangely events had come round that they two should be sitting there conversing intimately with a man whom that day they both disliked. And how about her presentiment?

She pushed the obtrusive thoughts away by saying:

"You are a great deal with your father?"

"Not of late years. When I was a lad I used to be with him as constantly as school duties would allow; but not now."

"Have you brothers and sisters, monsieur?"

"Two step-brothers. My sister died when I was a child."

The girl looked up at him with sudden pity. She felt the meaning that lay under the reticence of his tone. He was a man of domestic nature, and fate had made all his family relations cold. To Beth, whose only fear of death was the thought of its loneliness, this life of continued heart-solitude was terrible. She felt that she could never bear such a burden, and yet he was always so cheerful and sunny!

"Monsieur," she said, with one of her rarely tender smiles, "you must be either very strong or very hard ; which is it ?"

"Which is it ? I ask you, mademoiselle."

"I will not flatter you," she replied ; and Mabel glanced up well pleased. The remark was a milestone which showed the distance traversed during these quiet, dreamy days.

"You are a judge of character, mademoiselle," resumed M d'Isten presently. "Will you tell me what you think of my father's face ? I have a photograph here."

On her cordial assent M. d'Isten took from his pocket a book which was stamped with his name and crest.

"What a charming little affair !" exclaimed Mabel ; "may I see it ?"

He had taken out the photograph, and now handed it to Beth, while Mrs. Trescott examined the coat-of-arms.

"May I see what is inside ?" she asked mischievously.

"If you like."

"Oh, you are altogether too amiable. Come, Beth, let me see that ; you have been studying it long enough."

"It is a fine head," said Beth, glancing at M. d'Isten. There was a strong resemblance between father and son. "He is quite what I had imagined him : severely noble, and yet a man I would trust for liberality and charity without limit. I wish we had met him. I don't think I should be afraid of him."

"You would have no cause to be, you would understand one another," he said, with a proud light in his eyes. "He is a man you could appreciate."

"A handsome old gentleman," remarked Mrs. Trescott, carelessly putting the photograph on a table near by. "You will have white hair like that one of these days."

"Yes, we turn gray early," he replied, opening his book to replace the card. As he did so another photograph was half disclosed.

"Who is that ? Let us see that," exclaimed Mabel.

He flashed a glance across her, but without a word gave her what she desired.

"Oh," she said deprecatingly, as she saw a woman's face, "it is your wife."

He did not answer. Mabel was studying the picture, and Beth, after an involuntary glance at M. d'Isten's pained face, kept her eyes steadily downcast.

How could her aunt have made such a mistake? And he carried his wife's photograph always with him, in spite of what must have happened. He had a devoted nature to be so fond of his home, his father, and his wife. Her notion of his "chilly disposition," "unwarmed intellectuality," and so forth, began to dissolve and disappear.

"It is a discontented face," said Mabel at last, with an accent of dislike in her voice. "Otherwise, she is a handsome woman."

As Mrs. Trescott returned it to M. d'Isten he offered it to Bethesda in silence.

"Thanks," she said, refusing to receive it with a slight gesture, and not looking up.

If she had seen his expression of satisfaction then it would have puzzled her. This impulsive girl, with her keen sympathy and desire not to intrude, would have found it difficult to understand how any action of hers could have the slightest effect at such a moment. But he was not one to lose intellectual perception through emotion, and when his insight was verified it gave the pleasure of a gratified faculty.

Such a man, brought into familiar intercourse as he now was with a woman like Bethesda Hamilton, found a forceful charm in her mobile sympathy. The play of feeling in her face had an unceasing fascination. There was an iridescence of thoughts and moods, which, like the sea, rippled over an underlying strength on which one could buoyantly repose. She was fully his equal in quick comprehension, although from different causes, and her depth of emotion and spontaneity were a contrast that unconsciously answered to his own need.

Now, however, the former good understanding was for the time disturbed. The shadow of this dark secret fell over all three. Beth had risen, and was wandering around the room, while the others kept up a disjointed conversation. She felt an intruder when she came up against this blank wall through which the others had a gate. Presently she bethought her of a letter to be finished for the evening mail, and slipped unnoticed away.

She had been writing for some time, and had forgotten all her worries, when Mabel startled her into making a great dash by throwing aside the curtains and exclaiming:

"You truant! it's a shame——"

"It certainly is!" interrupted the girl. "See what you made me do! Isn't she naughty, monsieur?"

"Perhaps it was unkind to interrupt such an interesting letter," he said, with just the least tone of depression in his voice.

"A most interesting letter, I assure you," she said demurely.

"I will tell him your secret if you don't come," cried Mabel, "take care!"

"I will be there as soon as I have finished this. You see, you have put me back, and it must be ready for to-night's mail."

M. d'Isten had been watching her closely; he saw the slight flush in her cheeks, the brilliance in her eyes, and he thought he knew it all. Somewhat abruptly he turned away.

"See, René is hurt," said Mabel in a low tone. "I think you might leave your letter. Anyway, if you don't," in a louder voice, "I shall tell him."

"Very well," answered Beth carelessly. She never could be forced in anything, and certainly her aunt could entertain her friend for a few moments unassisted.

Mrs. Trescott chose her for the topic.

"Guess to whom she is writing, René?"

"Her *fiancé*," he replied, as if there were no doubt about the matter.

"Hardly; but I sometimes wonder if she will care for a *fiancé* more than she does for this. She sends a weekly letter to one of our best papers; isn't she clever?"

M. d'Isten turned sharply.

"Mademoiselle writes?" he exclaimed; "she writes and publishes?"

"She does indeed. It surprises you? She would not let me tell you before; she is very sensitive about having it known. But really, she has no need to be. She receives good pay; that shows her letters are worth something. Money is the test, especially with us, you know. But why should it amaze you so?" she added, noticing his absent manner, and a peculiar luminous appearance in his eyes.

"I cannot say—it is so unexpected——" He put his hand over his eyes a moment; then presently asked in his usual tone, but with eagerness:

"On what subjects does she write? On art?"

"O, no; mostly bits of foreign life, descriptions of this and that. Anything interesting, you know."

"And what name does she use?"

"Her own. She did not like the idea of a *nom de plume*."

"What is her own? Simply 'Beth'?" (He pronounced it "Bet.")

"No; that is the abbreviation. Her real name is Bethesda, from the Bible, you know. She has always had a romantic notion that it meant something in her life. She is full of such fancies. I think she will always like Algeria, because it was from there she first wrote. Not but that she has always been inclined to scribble; and even before she was old enough to do that she made her dolls talk to one another, like a story-book. We used to find it an excellent method to discover what had made an impression on her, for she would repeat conversations she had heard, weaving in her own fancies, and imaginary incidents, until we could hardly tell ourselves where what we had said left off and her own notions began."

"But she first published from Algeria?" said M. d'Isten, with repressed eagerness.

"Yes, she was very deeply impressed with the country there. Ah, ha, Miss!" she cried, as Beth here came in; "your secret is yours no longer. And René was greatly shocked to hear of your presumption! I doubt if he will ever speak to you again."

"On the contrary, I beg you to accept my profound congratulations, mademoiselle."

"Thank you," she said, blushing prettily. "I was afraid you would think me silly."

"How could I? You knew well I would not. The supreme thing one can do is to exercise one's faculties for the benefit of others, and you are allowing many the privilege of looking through your eyes."

"Yes, that is what some of her critics say," remarked Mabel. "'She makes us see what she sees,' they say, 'not coloured, but what it actually is.' We are very proud of that!"

"Don't, auntie!"

"And why not, if you please? I have a good right to praise my niece, if I wish. It gives me a reflected glory."

"Don't tease, Aunt Mabel."

"Mademoiselle Bethesda," said M. d'Isten, drawing nearer

her, "will you let me take your hand, and wish that this may bring you all the happiness I desire for you?"

His tone struck Beth as a little odd, but she held out her hand cordially. He took it in his, which was well-formed, thin, and ascetic; its clasp, rarely given, was possessive, not alone of another, but of himself; now it closed around Beth's, until she felt hers unbreakably bound.

"Understand," he said, "all the happiness I can desire for you. You may never know what that is, but pray accept the assurance that no wish was ever more sincere." He released her hand, and then asked: "May I see your letter?"

"Oh no!" she exclaimed; "it really isn't worth your reading."

"Let me be the judge. You need not be afraid to have me see what thousands read and praise."

"But it is all about little traits of foreign life, which would be a twice-told tale to you."

"And what is more charming than a glimpse of a scene familiar to us through a stranger's discerning eyes? Don't we all enjoy a painting better of something we know? You will give a new gem to my collection."

"But you will be so disappointed, with such ideas in your mind! I think I had better leave you in undisturbed possession of your fancy rather than interfere with the reality."

"You could give me a great pleasure," he answered quietly.

Bethesda wavered at this. There was something, she could not tell what, that took from her all desire to refuse. He had a persuasive quality, that relied little on words, but made one feel, insensibly as it were, that what he wished was easiest and best.

"Well, since you are kind enough to care about it, I will give you a printed letter," she said, after a momentary hesitation. "But don't read it until you are away from us," she added, with a deprecating glance; "then you can skip all you like."

He was wise enough to be content with this; and, when she had found and given him the letter, still with a shy reluctance, he pressed her to sing, knowing she would thus lose her unwonted self-consciousness quickest.

Her vocal accomplishments were not at all ambitious, and perhaps for that reason they pleased him the more. In any

case he would listen attentively as long as she could be prevailed upon to remain at the piano, surrendering himself to the charm of a voice in which pathos and passion mingled.

Her last song was "The Minstrel Boy," and as its stirring chords stopped she wheeled towards him with a patriotic fire in her eyes.

"You were in the war, monsieur?" she exclaimed.

"Yes," he answered shortly. A dark look came over his face, and his mouth set in a stern line. He replied to Beth's startled glance by saying:

"The war was a trick, a cruel deception. The gambler made the throw as a last resource, and when it failed, France was the one who paid. I led a few companies to the slaughter," went on M. d'Isten, his voice gaining a tense resonance. "I saw how our men gave their lives gladly for their country,—and how they cursed when they found it was only to bring her to dishonour! Louis Napoleon tarnished his country's fame; he outraged what should have been dearer to him, more sacred than his own mother;—what Frenchman can forgive?"

Here was what aroused the self-controlled man. He stood with his arm lifted as if he would strike every enemy of France to the earth, his tall figure erect and martial. He never had looked more of a man. Then his hands dropped and clasped before him.

"I love my country," he said, with a tone of deep tenderness; "I would give my life to keep one grain of dust from her robes. All Frenchmen feel the same; and yet that man, our *soi-disant* emperor, made us soak her skirts in the mire of blood and wrong. He brought us to such a pass for his own selfish ends, that we were obliged to do it; then, to complete the ignominy, he deceived us, so that we fell. The iron foot of foreign tyranny was placed on the neck of our nation, of our country, of our France!"

He broke off suddenly. Something rose in his throat and impeded utterance. He had never spoken in this way before. He had never known what it was to give way in *abandon*. But because a man is slow to fire it does not follow that he has no passion, as Bethesda now began to comprehend.

The impetus of the pent-up stream finding egress, carried him on now past even this curious faltering.

"I do not say that we were guiltless. We should have

recognised the wrong it was to France to place her in the power of a Louis Napoleon. We should have flung far from us the shame of the *coup d'état*. We should have shown the world that we could not be made into slaves even by ourselves. But we did not, and the fruits of slavery came. We were shown the tyranny of a master by subjection to a foreign power. There may have been treachery; there may have been deceit; but if we could not rise above these to the height of loyalty and honour we deserved to fall—as we have.”

“Have you?” said Beth bravely. “It seems to me that France was never so noble as now. She has thrown off the chains of the past and commenced a truer government. She first sowed the seeds of liberty throughout Europe, and she is now leading it in action. Has she not risen instead of fallen? She is whole-souled in her devotion to a cause. Just think how she broke through all the machinations of her enemies when she paid, in an incredibly short time, the debt Bismarck expected would cripple her for years! I think she is more worthy of admiration than she has ever been. She is not cast down; she is not despondent; and it is better to lose all than to fail in striving.”

M. d'Isten had listened to her with a grave face, and eyes fixed upon the floor. He raised them now, and Bethesda was startled by their shining.

“You are right, mademoiselle. I shall not forget. France and America exchange their gifts. They are comrades in arms. France gave America the idea to work upon; America gave France the solid encouragement of example, the sturdy child of her theories. I believe France can be a republic. She will have strength to carry her government, as you say, like a lantern before the eyes of Europe. She will not desert the cause, nor her sons their ambition.”

“What a patriot you are, René!” exclaimed Mrs. Trescott. “I never knew you so enthusiastic before.”

“Perhaps I never have been, at least in words; but I cannot imagine life without France.”

He took a turn or two in silence, and then added, with a smile:

“I remember in Algeria, when I was hardly out of dresses, how I used to long for *notre patrie*. It warms my heart to find you so eloquent in its defence, mademoiselle.”

“She is a perfect blue stocking in her devotion to the

French Revolution," said Mrs. Trescott ; " she is always reading about it."

" It is the most interesting period in modern history, surely," returned Beth quietly, as she crossed to a seat. " And it was your love for France which made you choose diplomacy as a profession, monsieur ?"

" No ; I entered the career in obedience to my father." A cloud of remembrance took the light from his face, but he continued cheerfully : " The work suits me. It brings into action each quality of the mind, and gives occupation to one's thoughts. It is also a position of considerable power."

" Yes, indeed," said Beth. " If I had been a man I should have tried to be a statesman. Why, everything is in their hands. They crystallise theories into action, and show the result in a State."

" Where did you find that idea, mademoiselle ?"

" Where should I ? In my brain, I suppose."

" It is an excellent brain if there are many such thoughts in it." He was silent for a moment. " Do women take much interest in politics in America ?" he asked then of Mrs. Trescott.

" Some do ; Beth, for instance. She is like her mother in that. I never could take the trouble to originate any ideas. Of course I could have done it had I taken the trouble ! *Cela va sans dire*. It was only during our war that I kept trace of affairs. Then, I assure you, women were interested !"

" And then it was, doubtless, that mademoiselle first took her interest in *la politique* ?"

" Oh, certainly ; a child of four years !"

" Patriotism can burn in a child's heart as well as in a woman's," said Beth ; " and I can remember well my ambition to do something for the soldiers, and putting my whole little strength into making pincushions !"

" You should have her marry a statesman, madame."

" Ah ! she will marry whom she chooses without being much influenced by me, I fear. And I don't want her to marry for ever so long yet. What should I do without her ?"

" What indeed," murmured M. d'Isten.

Beth had been wandering around the room, and did not hear these last phrases, which were spoken in an undertone. The sun had set in a golden radiance, and the twilight now grew and deepened. Beth's white dress shone dimly in the darkening

atmosphere ; and as the breaking up of this dreamy period drew near, as the delicious perfumes of the garden were drifted through the open windows, as René d'Isten thought of them and they of leaving Florence, a silence commenced, and grew, and lingered, until not one of the three knew how to break it.

Who can say what impulse it was that made Bethesda go to the piano and let fall on the stillness a low, minor melody, which bore these words :—

“ Parle-moi ; que ta voix me touche ;
Chaque parole sur ta bouche,
Est un écho mélodieux ;
Parle-moi ! parle-moi !

“ Quand ta voix meurt dans mon oreille,
Mon âme résonne, et s'éveille,
Comme un temple, à la voix de Dieu.
Parle-moi ! parle-moi ! ”

Her hands slipped from the keys when she had finished, and she sat motionless, unsatisfied.

The wide regret of her nature for Italy, the sympathetic sorrow for this man, which was hardly more than a wistful wonder, the yearning for something steady throughout change, secure beyond pain, found too restricted a meaning in the words she had sung ; but the pathos of the music stole into every vein and made her heart swell.

René d'Isten was watching her as she sat against the window. His arms were crossed and pressed close to his slow-throbbing breast. He noted every tremor of the fine lips ; he saw how the eyes grew big with moisture, and the long lashes feared to move ; and he saw, and grasped, a fixed resolve.

“ Are we all spellbound ? ” exclaimed Mrs. Trescott, rising with an abrupt rustle of silken skirts. “ Ring for candles, please, Beth ; that will send away the spirits. I don't like ghosts.”

CHAPTER X.

It has been remarked that in life, as in music, if two cannot strike the same note, or repeat it in different octaves, there must be a certain distance to avoid discord. But when they harmonise, there is an unsubstantial link which is inexpressible, yet unbreakable; unbeseechable, yet ever besought. Where sympathy fails, nothing can join; where it joins, nothing can separate.

“Même quand l’oiseau marche, on sent qu’il a des ailes.”

THE last Florentine morning dawned with a soft effulgence; the sky was of rose-leaves and marigolds, the earth tremulously sweet and fresh.

Bethesda was up early, and while the dew still sparkled on the creamy roses she went into the garden for a parting reverie. She could not be sad with all this joyous beauty around her, but neither could she fully respond to its gladness. She let her eyes follow the forms of trees and slender campanili to the deep sky, and rest there with a yearning too impersonal for sorrow or pleasure. The sea affected her in the same way; the ocean stretching out to the sky, the sky curving down to the sea, seemed to her like a great truth bending over an earnest mind, and she never wearied of such sublime monotony. It was with reluctance, therefore, that she obeyed her aunt’s imperious summons to breakfast.

It was a fussy meal, for Mrs. Trescott was troubled by many things, although nearly everything was ready for their evening start.

“Can I relieve you in any way, Aunt Mabel?” asked Beth as they rose from the table.

“No, no; nothing. I must do it all myself, except what Graziella can do better than either of us. You tend to your own things, and leave mine to me.”

“Very well,” replied the girl quietly, and, having thus seen how the land lay, presently took Assunta, and went to hear some music that she knew was to be finely rendered at the Santissima Annunziata.

She found a *prie-dieu* in the shadows of one of the great columns, where she had the wide nave before her, with its altar

lights, and clouds of rising incense ; but other things made only a slight impression upon her when the music began.

The soaring tenor notes, the throbbing pain of the baritone, the earthly despair of the bass ; the organ sending its dirge-like tones through the solemn arches, which now echoed to the joyous peal of resurrection, and again to the subsiding hush of peace attained,—to all this Bethesda responded with a spellbound intensity ; and as, at last, she bent her head on the cushion before her, who will say that the great yearning in her heart was not a prayer ?

When, a while later, Beth came out of the shadowy church, with its atmosphere of holiness, into the hot square, where the statue of the Grand Duke whom Browning has immortalised ever looks up to the window in which his once-bespoken and never-forgotten love sat day after day to receive the salute which was their only intercourse, M. d'Isten stepped to her side. She welcomed him with a quiet glance. There was no shrinking now, no sense of being jarred. She even pursued her own train of thought uninterrupted.

"You said, mademoiselle?" questioned her companion presently, as they walked home together, Assunta following.

"I? I did not speak," she replied.

"I thought there was a question you would ask me," he answered with calm assurance.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, smiling, "I understand now. My sister has a way of saying: What would you say if you said it? You are doing the same."

He did not mind being found out ; all he said was :

"Well?"

"I don't know that I should ask you—— But it might help——"

"You were thinking of the sermon we just heard?"

"No, not of the sermon. I don't care for those. They seem rather to interfere than to assist. I was thinking of the symbolism of the Catholic Church, and how beautiful it was."

"Yes?"

And—and I was wondering if that was what satisfied Catholics. How can it?" She was growing bolder now. "There must be something more to grasp ; they cannot be content with just this."

"But, mademoiselle, there is faith."

"Yes, it must be your faith," she answered slowly. "You all rest on what the Church gives you, without looking into it. You don't feel the need to see. It must be very restful."

"If we inquire, Miss Bethesda, what should we find more than the Church gives us? And if less, why should we wish to know that? We must be like little children, and believe."

"Ah, but I can't!" she cried in a low tone, that expressed more than René d'Isten could understand. "One can't be a child for ever; one cannot accept blindly——"

"But the Church sees; one can follow her," he said softly.

She shook her head, but did not reply. He did not understand her; it was impossible that he should, different as had been their religious educations, different as were their character in this. Bethesda could obey until she began to doubt; then her doubt must be solved before she could again trust. René accepted some things as he did his nationality; it was not a thing to be disputed; there could be no doubts.

The same evening they left Florence, and at the train was a pleasant surprise—at least to some. An official handed Miss Hamilton a great dewy mass of lilies of the valley, which he said had been given him by a gentleman who, after designating *la signora* when she left her carriage, had immediately gone away.

Beth knew then that Signor Straora was aware of her departure, and she sat thinking of him for some time. Monsieur d'Isten asked Mrs. Trescott meanwhile if he should not open the window? The fragrance of the flowers was somewhat heavy, he thought.

Later, when Mabel had composed herself to sleep, Monsieur d'Isten and Bethesda sat divided by the length of the carriage, both quite still for hours, thinking and feeling.

Beth realised that she was being carried onwards to an unknown future, a new life, and looked back with a curious sadness that was not pain or sorrow, but a keen appreciation of what this life in Italy had brought her, and an instinctive shrinking from the future. She did not feel the passionate dread that had oppressed her in entering Florence, but rather a passive knowledge that fate was speeding her onwards, irresistibly onwards, as the train through the night.

It was a mystic scene without to favour this illusion. The meadows and hillsides were glittering with fire-flies, as if the

overheated earth were sending up slow sparks of fire ; the glow-worms burned their green lamps in the grass, and in the sky there was heat-lightning, like involuntary thought. Sometimes it was eerie moonlight, such as pure elves might find among the ice-caverns of the glaciers ; again it lit the clouds with the flaming rose of a wild hope ; again it was the bright amber of assurance, or the rich purple of suffering made into joy ; and at times it seemed to the entranced girl like a vision of heaven itself.

Meantime M. d'Isten's busy brain was working as incessantly, and creating as marvellous visions in his own mind. The future was his thought, and there was all the difference between him and Bethesda that lies between activity and passivity. She was feminine in her readiness to be worked upon, unconscious though it were, and René d'Isten was thoroughly masculine in the vigour with which his mind resolved to work.

It was a chilly evening when they arrived in Paris thirty-six hours later. The city had always been a distasteful place to Bethesda. She felt a dislike to it, which she attributed to the frivolous and unclean atmosphere that seemed to taint every breath of Parisian air. She felt as if she were entangled in the meshes of a French novel as soon as the gay boulevards and glaring gaslights came in sight.

On this occasion, however, her feeling was less insistent, for M. d'Isten's pleasure in a return to his capital communicated itself to her, and the rest after the long journey was certainly a relief.

Then, too, when they arrived at their hotel, the same at which Mrs. Trescott had first met M. d'Isten, and were shown to the large *salon* reserved for them, they saw upon the table a rich basket of flowers that filled the air with a fragrant welcome.

M. d'Isten had remained below a few moments, and when he came up he was assailed with exclamations of praise and gratitude by Mabel.

"In memory of the Flower City," he said, with a smile, standing framed by the *portières*, hat in hand, and his dark eyes seeking Beth, who had not spoken.

"It is a bit of dear Italy itself," she said, with a swift glance of thanks.

"That is good ! *et après ?*"

"*Après ?*" echoed Mabel, "what can there be *après ?*"

"Not the deluge, I trust," he returned, still waiting.

Beth had looked around quickly, and now espied on a tiny table in the corner, half hidden by the wine-red curtains, a Venetian vase of exquisite delicacy, containing one moss rose.

"Ah !" she exclaimed, "I have found the *après !*"

"Let me present to you '*Béthesda*,' mademoiselle," said M. d'Isten, now joining her. "This rose," he added, "contains my criticism and my thanks."

He watched her curiously as the light beamed over her face, which the mention of her writing always brought. Some confusion was in her manner ; then she said :

"You are very gentle with me, monsieur. I appreciate it, believe me. And how lovely the flower is ! I never saw a white moss rose before with that warm colouring towards the heart."

"I thought you would like it," was all he said.

In spite of this good understanding on their arrival, when there was no room for anything but liking, René d'Isten found Miss Hamilton difficult to win from her instinctive reserve—more difficult here than in Florence. The truth is, that he was a man of remarkable personal magnetism ; and a woman of as positive a nature as Bethesda, and one who possessed no little mental electricity herself, naturally sprang away from the attraction to which she had for a time half unwillingly and half unconsciously yielded.

Quite a number of friends, too, were glad to find Mrs. Trescott and Miss Hamilton in Paris, and insisted on having them to little quiet dinners or lunches, and called on them frequently. But M. d'Isten contrived, through his intimacy with Mrs. Trescott, always to make one at the impromptu entertainments that took place in the red and gold *salon*. He soon, indeed, made himself indispensable, and knew how to aid the ladies unobtrusively, as well as how to avoid any appearance of being other than a guest.

Mrs. Trescott, who enjoyed leaning when she felt at perfect liberty to change her attitude at any instant, found him "a great comfort ;" and Beth herself could not help but notice how much more smoothly the evenings passed when he was present than when absent, as he took care to be once or twice after he had quietly established his position.

One of his opportunities to break through Beth's easy and

half-indifferent reserve he improved towards the end of the week. They happened to be side by side in the embrasure of a window, and he detained her by saying :

"You have been writing to-day, Miss Béthesda."

"Why should you think that, monsieur?" she asked, a little startled, for in truth she had spent all the afternoon on a Parisian letter.

"I am not blind," he answered, noting the unusual brilliancy of her eyes, and the delicate flush in her cheeks.

"Have I an ink-blot anywhere?" she exclaimed. "That is all I can fancy should betray me."

"I give you credit for more comprehension, mademoiselle."

"You flatter me, monsieur."

"Presently you will not say that."

"Ah, you are a prophet as well as a seer?"

"Sometimes."

"You find a great heretic in me, I fear."

"I shall convert you."

"Self-depreciation is not one of your failings, then?"

"There are some things one may know," he said, catching her eyes with a steady grasp of his own.

Her attention was aroused, and this was all he wanted. Indifference is the one thing to be dreaded when one wishes to make a friend. And, during the long hours of resurrecting spring sunshine, while he worked, as well as the starry nights, when he dreamed, he had allowed his fancies to caress the thought of securing a friendship which should indemnify him for the disappointments life had given him to bear.

Mrs. Trescott could not at all take this place. She was a charming acquaintance—delightful just where she was. There was a kind of *camaraderie* between them which was piquant and entertaining to both; but, for any serious friendship—for anything, in fact, more than momentary—her capriciousness could not be relied upon.

Bethesda was of an entirely different nature, and she it was of whom he had determined to make a friend—a true "American" friend. He had established a committee of ways and means to this end within the closed portals of his own mind, and it held its meetings frequently. The spring (it seemed sometimes that this spring had lasted for months, and again it seemed but an hour since it commenced) had entered

into him with its restless longings, and he wished something definite, if nothing more than freedom to grow, to ensue.

He thought he should accomplish his purpose also, for Bethesda was in many ways as transparent as crystal to him. He saw her innocence, her earnestness, her purity, with as reverential a recognition as Indians would see the limpid ball into which they believe pure hands can roll water. He also perceived her quick distrust when anything equivocal came near; her virgin dignity which drew itself aside from anything she felt to be wrong; and, in full view of these facts, he here took his stand. She never should feel anything to excite her distrust in him. He had seen her soul step back in her eyes from the mere approach of a tainted thought or glance; there was a terror in such chastity—a terror and a glorious pride! He was more proudly thankful than the world could guess that his youth had not been squandered. He had not understood its value before; now it came to him immeasurably increased. She, the pure Béthesda, whose sensitiveness felt like a mirror the blurring of a too-close breath, should become his friend by the exercise of their best selves; she should recognise that here was something higher than had ever appealed to her before, and “awake to the renown” of her own perfect womanhood.

His steel-like determination to succeed in anything he had planned made the affair seem to him a *fait accompli*, at the same time that it exerted the fascination of creation; and, after the departure of the compatriots who had claimed so much of the ladies’ attention, his deft manipulation, aided by Mrs. Trescott’s liking, soon succeeded in overcoming Beth’s instinct to hold herself aloof.

The days, indeed, presently took on a settled method which had for its aim to bring M. d’Isten and the ladies together as much as possible. In the morning shopping and various *affaires* divided them, but in the afternoon they would take drives to the Bois, or Passy, or some of the other lovely and historic environs of the capital, M. d’Isten being now the host, and returning with *empressement* the courtesies he had received in Italy.

The ladies enjoyed them thoroughly. Mrs. Trescott delighted in the brilliant and changing life of Paris, the sense of being delicately cared for, and the interesting society of M. d’Isten, whom every day she more enthusiastically liked. Beth, too, felt that

Paris held some uncontaminated pleasures after all. The reaction from her magnetic repulsion had set in as she came under the sway of M. d'Isten's more continual presence, and her misconceptions of him, as she now called them, had all faded away like the morning mists when the sun is high. She allowed her mind to open to him without fear—fear indeed never suggested itself. He was married, and she knew it; knew too that he was loyal to his wife, and keenly sensitive to every tie of honour. They often spoke incidentally of Madame d'Isten, and there was never the slightest blame in his accents, or anything but interest in hers.

The girl was exceedingly innocent, not through ignorance, but dauntless faith in those she once liked. She would as soon suspect an apple tree of poisoning her as a friend of harming her. Some trees did, she knew, but hers was not of that kind. Nor was her confidence, in this instance, unshared by others.

"Monsieur le Comte would be charming if he were not so deplorably serious," said a French lady, whom they met one day at the house of an American resident.

"Why, we find him very cheerful and entertaining," exclaimed Mrs. Trescott.

"Oh, for that, yes. But I mean——" and she waved her hand airily. "You know there is a something some men have, an audacity, an—I know not what, which renders them truly irresistible! But then our friend is not frivolous; he has not profited by Paris; you understand? *Au contraire*, he has a position!—and a reputation! *Eh, bien*, I wish my husband had such a one!" and the small-brained exquisitely-dressed woman actually smothered a sigh.

"Do you know his wife?" another acquaintance asked Mrs. Trescott. "No? You miss little! It did not cease to astonish all the world, while she was here, the attention her husband paid her. He was foolish enough to be a lover rather than a husband, and she, of course, repaid it by the most ill-mannered disagreeability. Spanish, you know. For me, I don't care for those fierce, self-engrossed southern women. She does not come any more to the city, and we do not grieve. We see a great deal more of the count!"

"I hope we may never meet those women again!" exclaimed Beth indignantly, when they were driving home.

"You probably never will," answered Mabel carelessly.

"But I am glad to have seen them. It makes one proud to know a man of whom women will complain in that way. Oh, Beth, we have a good, good friend in René!"

Meantime the spring was blossoming fast into summer, with the vividness of new life on every leaf. The blue skies lifted themselves, and intensified more and more like the beloved Italy, which did not seem far away, and the three were never weary of being out of doors, and found a constantly-recurring interest in the patriotic incidents M. d'Isten would tell them, with all the fervour of his character shining in his face.

They were mostly tales of heroism, courage, and self-abnegation, and Mabel remarked it one day.

"It is the French temperament, auntie," said Beth. "They are always sacrificing themselves for some noble idea."

M. d'Isten gave her a glance of pleasure.

"It isn't much self-sacrifice usually," said Mabel. "Glory is their goddess, and when anything promises to bring her they don't much care what they do."

"Oh, madame!" exclaimed M. d'Isten.

"It's true," she insisted. "See how you overran Europe, and destroyed your much-lauded *liberté*, and gave them all only an *égalité* of slavery, and no *fraternité* at all! And that is your most glorious epoch!"

"It may well be," exclaimed Beth, before M. d'Isten could speak. "See how everywhere they went the people rose to help them, because the French had first shown them how tyranny and manhood are opposed! There is not a monarch in Europe, not even the Czar, who has such despotic power as he did have, just because France has risen and pealed through the Continent the one word: Freedom! It is the 'Let there be light' of the modern world."

Bethesda's eyes were flashing as she sank back in her seat. M. d'Isten had an expression of proud gratitude on his face, and Mrs. Trescott laughed.

"Gracious, child! what an explosion! I didn't know you were so devoted to France; what has happened?"

"You know I have always admired the French," said Beth, her lips quivering with that sensibility which ever delighted M. d'Isten. "They are extremists, may be, but they are impassioned by an idea as no other nation ever was. And I do hate lukewarmness!"

"I fancy I remember," mused Mabel, with a teasing twinkle in her eyes, "a certain young woman who wanted to kiss the ground when she landed in France last. My dear, it's becoming dangerous. I shall have to hurry you home ; you might like France best yet !"

"Never !" exclaimed the girl, her cheeks now rosily tinted, for M. d'Isten was watching her with curiosity. "I shall always like my own dear land best,—especially when I am away from it."

"Ah ! you like it best when away from it ? And you were glad to reach our France ? That is good !" said M. d'Isten, with immense satisfaction.

"She was glad, indeed. You ought to have seen her in Dieppe, just crazy at being back again."

"It is true," acknowledged Beth ; "and what I can't understand is why I was so pleased to touch France. If it had been Italy, now. But then I did not particularly like France as France. I had not been in it enough, you know."

She added this apologetically, with a glance at M. d'Isten. He did not look as if he needed any apology ; he was simply radiant. He bent forward to arrange some wrap for her, and there was a new, happy security in his manner. He always treated her as if she were a frail queen, who must have every wind shielded from her with solicitude ; but now there was a delicate tenderness in every touch, as if she had been consigned to his protection.

"You have forgotten your hatred of Paris, haven't you ?" asked Mabel.

"Yes, I like it now. It is really homelike to me. Somehow, I never saw it this way before."

M. d'Isten caught his breath, and did not dare look up. He felt an inexpressible relief when Mabel remarked :

"I always told you it was your illness that prejudiced you. I read you pretty well, *chérie* ; you can trust to me."

And Bethesda did not say nay.

They drove home swiftly, because a little late. Every one was hastening to dinner ; the boulevards were full, and the shopkeepers were like children out of school. The labour and struggle of the day seemed on every side to give place to a buoyant sense of enjoyment which is peculiarly French.

"This is the hour I like Paris best," said Bethesda. "How happy each one seems! Don't you suppose one is better, truer, in being happy?"

"I am sure one is," answered M. d'Isten gravely.

"Ah, look!" exclaimed the girl.

They had rolled out from the Boulevard into the Place de la Concorde, and now the broad Elysian Fields rose gently before them, lined with deep-green trees, bearing spikes of rose and snowy bloom. At the top it was crowned by the triumphal arch, uplifted against the sunset sky, and seeming the gateway to a golden world.

Bethesda leaned forward in the landau to catch the full view; the light irradiated her face, and brought out the glory of her hair; her eyes gazed at the dazzling splendour unblenchingly, for she felt a joy that made her strong to bear any radiance. Her soul seemed to expand with a twofold life, and leaped within her. She felt an intense desire to spring forward and delay the sun in its setting, just that time might let her drink deeply of the happiness this hour held.

But she was not afraid even of darkness, and as they sped up the avenue amid the whirr of wheels and tramp of horses' feet, she watched the glowing light pale without fear. She trusted in the new elixir which had come to her here.

Ever after, the fragrance of the chestnut blossoms, and the home-coming atmosphere, recalled that sight in magical clearness. She could see it all, and she could feel, too, as she did then almost unnoticed, René d'Isten's eyes shining upon her.

CHAPTER XI.

"Two things fill me with awe—the starry heavens, and the sense of moral responsibility in man."—KANT.

"Choose well, and your choice is
Brief, but yet endless."—GOETHE.

THE great hour came; finally, of course, without premeditation.

Bethesda had done much writing lately; nothing connected except her letters, but many scraps of felicitous similes, of character sketches, of word painting; all of which had a strain of un-

conscious pathos in them, suggesting that, like her golden sunset sky, they might be painted only on the material of tears.

She had much thought suggested to her now, for every evening René d'Isten read aloud to them from some French author, introducing them, with consistent choice, to that fine analysis of human nature which makes the French mind, like the Greek, stand alone. He read in a manner that let the words fall together into the vividness of reality, bringing each thought into relief, yet combining all so admirably that one could not detach any separate expression without its losing much of its value.

Then there would be discussions, or comparison of ideas, on what they had read, in which opposing views would be brought forward and reconciled,—at least between Bethesda and M. d'Isten. He was verifying preconceived ideas with a sense of the fitness of things which was indescribably keen ; and Bethesda glided from surprise to surprise, in finding that M. d'Isten had a multitude of opinions like hers, only more developed and posed ; and that there were a number of points which they had each reached with equal certitude by widely-diverging paths. Each hour showed how much further back than their acquaintance dated their mutual tendencies toward one another. It was the destiny of their characters that they should meet.

About ten every evening they separated, for M. d'Isten had social engagements which his diplomatic duties did not allow him to neglect. Politicians, especially where the intrigues of Courts lead, well understand the necessity of social power to compass any end ; and the very charm of this friendship which now subsisted between the three was greatly owing to the fact that in no way did it interfere with former duties or habits, but simply rounded the whole.

Occasionally, it is true, Mrs. Trescott would try to detain M. d'Isten, just to test her power ; but he understood her too well to yield ; and, if she played the abused, he was always rewarded by at least Bethesda's approval.

So the days and evenings came and went—smoothly, suggestively, instructively—until an evening in the last of May struck its date ineffaceably on their lives.

Bethesda had been writing all day, hastening to send off a couple of delayed letters. It had been difficult for her to fix

her mind on the incidents she needed, and she was tired. She acknowledged it when M. d'Isten inquired if her pretty work was done, that she should sit with idle hands?

"Tired hands, and tired brain too," she replied, letting her head rest on the back of her wine-red *fauteuil*. "Don't read, please. I have been pinning my mind so assiduously to its work to-day that it is full of holes, and ideas would go through it as if it were a sieve. Talk to us, won't you? Shan't he, auntie?"

"I am never averse to that form of entertainment," said Mabel, smiling.

"Well, then, I will be speaker to-night," said M. d'Isten, his long-contemplated schemes suddenly crystallising into action. "Shall I tell you what I have been doing to-day?"

He addressed Mrs. Trescott, but moved his chair so that he could include both ladies in one glance. Madame Mabelle was fairly entangled in the meshes of her silk embroidery. Bethesda sat leaning her head, with its low masses of bronzed gold, in profile against the passionate colour. She looked somewhat sad, as usual, when in repose. Her hands were crossed listlessly; small, maidenly, firm hands, capable of all devotion, so delicate yet strong were they; and her eyes rested with an indistinct pathos on René d'Isten's face.

It seemed to him then that a current, invisible, mysterious, and irresistible united them. Her glance seemed to penetrate without refraction into his inmost being. But his soul could not open to it; not quite yet. He let his eyes fall as he went on:

"To-day I have been writing also. I was at my desk before six o'clock. You are surprised, mademoiselle? It is not so unusual, for I rise early. This morning, however, I was unusually interested. I received a letter last evening from Madame d'Isten. It is a rare occurrence for her to so favour me, and it held me awake for several hours. And need I say so long a time could not pass, without my also thinking of you?"

His glance lingered on each of his companions, and at last rested on Bethesda's hands. When he spoke it was with slow emphasis.

"You three and my father are those who stand together, and alone, in my gallery of the world."

Madame Mabelle beamed upon him, and he returned it gratefully. Bethesda looked at him in momentary surprise. How could she belong to that select circle? But of course it was only his politeness.

"I came to an understanding of it during the night," he went on, "but I can always determine best in writing, so I have it written here. May I read you a little?"

"We should be delighted," said Mabel.

"I call it: My Friends: and I take them as they came to me."

It was written in French, of course; its delicacy will be ruined by translation, but it must be done for truth's sake.

"My father is my friend of all time. He has held ever before me the inspiring example of integrity and honour. To him, after my country, are due my allegiance and highest esteem.

"Louise accepted me as her husband. To her I owe willing service, ready sympathy, untiring care and affection.

"Madame Mabelle has conferred upon me the knighthood of her American friendship. To her I lend admiration and deferential homage. I may add that she has given me much of the keenest pleasure of my existence.

"B  thesda is my intellectual counterpart. She incites me to activity in every field. She inspires me to believe I am capable of doing what heretofore I have only dreamed. She completes each half-formed thought. She fills the ideal form of womanhood. To her I give fealty, reverence, and impregnable devotion."

As the last words fell from his lips he looked up. Bethesda had grasped the arms of her chair, and was sitting upright, her eyes dazzling, and her cheeks flushed.

She lost remembrance of everything previous in the surprise of that last paragraph. She was amazed, astounded; and yet she felt it was true. Her eyes did not sink before his as he met her quivering glance. It quivered through every barrier, every veil, to the real core of the man. It was a marvel that he could bear it unshrinkingly, but his long education served him well at this supreme need. He saw, and knew, and understood; and at the same instant held fast to his self-possession. He was not afraid of what she should see, and he was aware now of what he should do.

Mrs. Trescott watched them in some confusion. This was

an unexpected tearing away of the veil for her. It not only surprised her, but aroused some alarm. What did it all mean? And where might it lead? As long as the paramount attraction in the tripartite friendship was held to be herself, she had no fears. Was she not nine years his elder? But here sprang up danger. The little piece of paper had sent a lightning flash over the land, and disclosed it to be a strange one, where she had supposed it thoroughly familiar.

She looked keenly from one to the other with her now black eyes.

Beth was certainly excited, and as certainly pleased. To inspire such a man's intellect was no small thing; the trouble might be, was it not too great a thing?

She turned to him. There was some excitement manifest in his manner also, but he was gravely answering Beth's eager, deprecatory questions as to how it could be true, by showing her that her American birth, her education, her life, had all combined to make her a new person to him, and one who appealed strongly to what he was pleased to name his unwarmed, but not insensible mind.

"Your mental vigour," he went on to say, "when you are so fragile, inspired me with admiration before I had ever seen you; and since there has been conferred upon me the pleasure of an intimate acquaintance my impression has been indelibly fixed. This is one of the pleasures Madame Mabelle has given me."

He looked towards her with a smile, and some hidden anxiety.

"I hope it will always be a pleasure," she said seriously.

"You are good," he answered, purposely misinterpreting her phrase. He took her hand, and, rising, kissed it.

"Be careful," she said, in a warning tone so low that pre-occupied Beth did not hear.

He gave her a sharp, inquiring glance. She shook her head in doubt.

"See," said he in a reassuring voice, seating himself in his old position, and spreading out his hands with a frank gesture, "I will tell you all I have in my mind. Ever since I was a boy I have been fond of literature, but I have not had sufficient faith in myself to pursue it as a career. I am not satisfied that my thoughts are original or worth recording, or

my fancies either poetical or just. In spite of these doubts I have written some, and have felt a new power since I have known Miss Béthesda. With this in view I have a suggestion to make. It has been gradually maturing in my mind until I am convinced of its success."

He looked from one to the other to judge what might be safe to say. Bethesda was all eager anticipation, with a shadow of humility softening her face. Mabel, relieved by his words and manner, had resumed her work. He proceeded :

"Mademoiselle is about to return to America ; her correspondence will then be stopped, you tell me. I propose, to avoid this, that in my letters to you, madame, I shall enclose some pages of incidents, which I am fortunately situated for obtaining, and which she can then mould and amplify as she would her own notes. What do you think of it, madame?"

"It would be very lucky for her, I'm sure," replied Mabel. There was no danger in this.

"But do you think I could do it?" hesitated Beth.

"Certainly," was M. d'Isten's prompt response. "They should be identical with your own notes. You know the life here, and could give them fulness and colour to perfection. The political portions I would, if you desired, write out more amply. You could undoubtedly make it successful."

"I don't see why you couldn't," added Mabel.

"I had not expected to do anything for the papers when I went home," remarked Beth, still timidly. "I thought I would try magazine articles, or stories, perhaps."

"There, too, I could aid you," persisted M. d'Isten. "Your ideas are different, and yet in many ways the same as mine. We study humanity from a similar point of view. You analyse and idealise man as I analyse and idealise institutions. We appreciate the same characteristics ; we admire the same qualities. But you are a woman—I am a man ; we will, necessarily, see different sides of life ; we will have different experiences. I could give you suggestions, with, perhaps, some virile force, and you could lend them body, and form, and grace. It would make your books have an unusual character, and give them the power of appealing to a larger audience, mademoiselle."

"Indeed it would," exclaimed Bethesda, catching a glimpse

of how much wealth would in this way reach her work, and how much good might be done by it. "I wonder if it could be accomplished."

"Why not? We could at least try, and I have no doubts of the result. If we accustom ourselves to write together, I am convinced it will be an imperative need not again to be eliminated. My trust is not wholly unfounded," he added, after a moment's pause; and then he told them of the *feuilletons* he had written; that others had been solicited, but refused, because he was himself dissatisfied with them.

"I know now that this is what I have always desired. You could round my whole intellectual life, Miss Béthesda; you could develop sources of enjoyment and benefit which never have, nor ever could be, otherwise developed;—and who can say what benefit may accrue to others, from thoughts thus combined, and perceptions doubled in strength and feeling?"

He was bending upon her the whole force of his will, and the magnetism to which she was so sensitive. He held her under the control of his mind, as it were, but with the consent of her own will, free from all other influences. The existence which animated him was no longer simple, but complex; he had no consciousness outside the focus of this concentrated life. It must be.

Bethesda rose and paced the room to and fro. Her hands were clasped behind her; warm colour was in her cheeks, and her eyes gleamed with constantly-changing lights. Each instant she raised them to M. d'Isten's intent face, as if studying and appealing to him at the same time.

It was an immense temptation. Nothing could have been more absolutely in consonance with her tastes (didn't René d'Isten know this?); to help another, to please one she liked, to be of use, were passionate desires with her. And how much it would benefit her! The strength, and surety, and precision which she knew she lacked would thus be gained; and perhaps sometimes, as he said, it might do good.

There is a vigour of purpose, a vivid comprehension of the difference one soul can make, that infuses youth with a grandeur all its own. Each soul is the possible pivot on which the world may turn, and youth feels this with an intensity which

make promises seem deeds, and tendencies fulfilment; and Bethesda was in the glamour of all this now. But could it be done? There were a thousand difficulties which she, her mind suddenly enlightened, could apprehend; and which he, perhaps, did not. In any case hers would be the responsibility, and if he were not content——? She suggested this frankly.

“But I should be,” he answered with emphasis. “My part would always be one of suggestion: nothing less, nothing more. You would have absolute freedom to accept or reject any expression, any idea. And what you did I should not question. To me it would be right because you did it.”

“No, no; I must have the benefit of your criticism, as you say you wish mine. I shall need it vastly more.”

“But it would not be feasible,” he replied firmly. “I shall send you everything, and you could not send it back before publication. No; what I once give you is yours for ever. You can keep it or discard it. You do with it what you choose.”

They talked the plan over a long time. Mrs. Trescott, because this concerned others entirely, and, perhaps, for another reason, saw more clearly than the others where it tended. Her fears, dispelled at first by M. d'Isten's business-like manner, returned as this remarkable conception took form and reality before her. All confused as the fears were, they made her uneasy. She asked each of them to write out calmly the conditions of this compact, and follow it out to its furthest results; they would be better able then to judge whether it were advisable to consolidate it. She even suggested to René the specific danger of future developments. This was when Beth had gone to her room for something. She returned before he had time to answer, but his dignified self-possession and unruffled security again calmed her—especially as they acquiesced in her suggestion without hesitation.

But they were both, consciously or unconsciously, determined to carry out the plan. René d'Isten had long ago resolved upon it, and Bethesda was swayed to forget the scruples which only questioned her own inability, and to enter into it with enthusiasm.

She looked at him as she would on one transformed in her sight. All their intercourse suddenly took on a new

meaning. Her place, from being that of a casual friend, below many others, was changed to that of one elected to stand alone by the side of this man,—alone, separated from the whole world, as his intellectual companion.

René d'Isten hardly dared to glance at her; he was conscious in every fibre of his being that she recognised her position,—that she had already left her aunt, her friends, her former associations, her old self, to step into the richness of her womanhood, and take the place he had chosen her to fill. Because of the very intensity of this knowledge he ignored it, and shielded himself in his consummate self-control.

All his skill was needed in winning over Mrs. Trescott. She was of a deeply jealous temperament; he knew half of her uneasiness—which he clearly understood, and also its well-founded reasons—was an unconscious stirring of this fatal poison. It is human nature, he told himself, to dislike seeing some one unexpectedly preferred before oneself. Heretofore he had been her especial friend; through this evening's work he became far more closely united to her niece. It was human nature in him also, that her preoccupation and visible uneasiness, thus explained by him, should flatter him enough to make him throw much earnestness into his persuasion, and to use eloquence with the finest art. It was highly necessary, moreover, that she should be won to their plan; which, in the present stage, could not go on without her; so, with the most delicate discrimination, he allayed the fears she never suspected had been aroused, and won her to a tacit consent in the experiment.

They were surprised, at last, by midnight. M. d'Isten took a hasty and apologetic leave. Mabel detained Beth, after he had gone, to warn her to look carefully before she bound herself to this compact. What if she should find this intellectual companionship meant more to her than she now thought it would? What if it should make her unhappy? Supposing it filled her mind so as to keep her from marrying? Think what a lonely life that would be. She, herself, without husband or children, often found life hard, and yet she had had her nieces to educate. She did not want to see her darling, whom she had sheltered so long, saddened in the brightest period of her life. She wanted her to be always a sunbeam, carrying light and pleasure wherever she went.

At these tender words Beth embraced her aunt, and pro-

mised her she would think ; she would confront the question in its whole extent, and judge without bias.

And Mabel sent the girl off to bed, feeling as if an earthquake had taken place, and that her little girl's life had suddenly diverged far from hers. But she would resign herself if only the child might be happy.

Bethesda, once in her own room, did not think of sleep. There were two windows—one looking out on the street, the other over a garden full of trees, fragrant bushes, and vines. Some of the Virgin Vine wreathed the arched window and crept in over the low sill. She went and knelt there, leaning her arms among the tendrils, the first of many times when the small hours found her in the same position.

She felt as if her mind had an immensity as large as the deep-blue heavens, and with as many points of palpitating white light. They might be worlds, or they might be unknown fires ; she scarcely cared which. The universe was filled with the glad exultation now thrilling through her. Her heart throbbed with swift fulness ; her limbs, even as she knelt, trembled under her ; yet she felt a conquering strength, an illimitable power of action and devotion which caught her up into an uncalculating rapture.

Gradually, however, the hour, the silence, the distant stars, calmed her. She began to think instead of only feeling, and finally rose, lit candles, and paced up and down her room.

In writing thus together it would become of great value to both of them undoubtedly. But just here came a danger, as Aunt Mabel suggested. If they met and harmonised thoroughly in intellect, was there not a possibility of their meeting in other ways, warmer and more perturbed ?

For him ?—he must decide.

For herself ?—Well, she found him, outside their compact, a noble, unselfish, and pure man. He was strong ; he had conquered himself, and thus gained the force to conquer others. He grasped her with quiet firmness ; he appealed to much of what she believed was the best in her ;—but this all mentally and morally. She wondered sometimes that she did not have to guard herself more with him ; the secret was that there was nothing against which she needed protection. They met as minds alone, and would do so more and more as their intercourse was confined to that only. Of this she felt sure.

But taking it at the uttermost ; supposing that she would find no man who could efface him, so but that he would stand high above them all ; supposing that the thought of him should prevent her marrying ;—what then ?

He was noble ; it would not be degrading to admire, even to love, mentally, a married man, so that they remained ever on those heights where base fogs could not reach them. It could do no harm ; he would never know it, or, in knowing it, would recognise it as a crystal-pure affection that contained no danger to either of them. And she would have a noble ideal, a cultivated mind, a self-sacrificing life to love. What harm, almost what sorrow, could that be to her ? It would be a lonely life, perhaps sad, but an elevated one, which would in the end raise her from the tumult of an impulsive woman's existence to serene heights, whence a wider vision of the world could be obtained.

She wrote the argument out in her diary, and ended it with these words : “ I see no danger that can deter me. I accept the compact.”

CHAPTER XII.

“ Is there naught better than to enjoy ?
No deed which, done, will make time break,
Letting us pent-up creatures through
Into eternity, our due,—
No forcing earth teach heaven's employ ? ”

ROBERT BROWNING.

THE next day was Sunday, a balmy beautiful day. Everywhere was the atmosphere of festivity which characterises a Continental Sabbath. All the world intended to take the fullest enjoyment from the mild May *fête*, and Mrs. Trescott and Bethesda were going to do the same. It had become a custom to them to be out-of-doors all the pleasant Sundays with M. d'Isten, who was then free, and delighted to devote his whole time to them. Often they went to church to hear high mass,—Mrs. Trescott yielding the American chapel because there was a clergyman there she disliked,—and then wandered out into the country, or to some of the pleasure-grounds which are numerous in Paris, taking a light luncheon where they could find it, and sharing an innocent gaiety with the people of the great city.

Sometimes they spent the long sunny hours in a country ramble, driving out fairly beyond the city, and then strolling through the woods, or idling under the trees, or visiting rural farmhouses; many of which were afterwards sent intact to America by Bethesda's pen. To-day, however, it had been previously arranged that they were to go to church; and, after a luminous night's rest, when she never fell so soundly asleep but that she was conscious of an unusual brightness in her mind, Beth rose and took her coffee alone. It was not until the morning was well advanced that her aunt appeared.

"Well, chérie, how is it this morning? Have you been up writing since daybreak?"

"Not quite, auntie; one does not need to rise so very early to be ahead of you!"

"*Impertinente!* But what have you written? Won't you read it to me?"

Bethesda paused a moment, and turned over the pages thoughtfully before she replied:

"Yes, if you like."

"I would very much like to hear it," said Mrs. Trescott, seating herself opposite Beth.

She watched her, trying to see between the lines, while she listened to the earnest tones in which the young woman read what she had written before she slept. Bethesda finally looked up with a somewhat solemn bravery in her eyes as she pronounced the words:

"I accept the compact."

Mabel's face was curiously tender and admiring.

"So," she said, with a long breath which seemed of relief, "you have decided. I hope it will prove all you think it, darling." After a moment she added: "I wish René could see that."

"What!" exclaimed Beth, flushing.

"I do; all but the very last, at any rate. It would make him understand, and appreciate you even better than he does."

"Do you think the last is wrong?" asked Bethesda, with a searching glance.

"No; not wrong. Sorrowful, maybe, sweetheart."

She put her hand on Beth's lap, and the girl took it in both her own.

"If it is not wrong, I won't find it sorrowful, rest assured,

auntie. It is a greater richness than most women have in their lives. Besides, that is only an extreme case, which I never should have thought about if you had not suggested it."

She met her aunt's fond gaze with open sunniness.

"You must be married some day, dear," said Mabel; "but for me—alack the day."

"You wouldn't be sorry if this kept me beside you?" asked Beth archly,

"Yes, yes; I don't want you to remain unmarried. It is not a happy life."

Here the sound of a knock on the parlour door disturbed them.

"It is M. d'Isten!" exclaimed Bethesda. "We are late."

He had come to see, he said, if they still had the desire to go to church? Thanks, he would not come in.

"You wish to go, Beth?" asked Mrs. Trescott.

"Indeed I do, greatly," was the answer.

"*La petite dévote!*" said René, smiling, and left them.

The Madeleine was full when they arrived. M. d'Isten took them in by a side entrance, and Mabel was seated on one side of the small door, Bethesda and M. d'Isten on the other.

Bethesda had brought her little Imitation, with the prayers in the front and directions for joining in the mass. It was one M. d'Isten had given her. She was in a devout mood; she felt an unwonted drawing towards religion. There was a deep yearning for communion with One all-seeing and all-mighty; with One who could guide her, absolutely, to the best. Conscience began to tremble as life pressed upon her with new thoughts and new questions. Bethesda had yet to learn that abstract right is above any conscience, and that it we must obey. Principle was not yet developed in her. The instincts of her nature were true and noble, but the quivering needle of a compass is not more unsteady in comparison to the polar star, than conscience in comparison to principle. Let some iron force, or some electric current, come, and the index hand would point far from due north. Even at the best sailors are obliged to make allowances for the nails in their own ships, as well as a thousand larger things, before they can rely upon their compasses; and the bias of one's own nature, beside the many influences of heredity and education, makes one's conscience a very fallible guide.

But this was all unrecognised, and Bethesda only felt the

tendency which caused her to lend herself reverently to the solemn rites performed before her. She and M. d'Isten knelt and rose together ; he looked over the tiny book she held, and read what she read ; occasionally he caught her eyes. They were full of a deep wistfulness ; now soothed by a strengthening line, now awed by the mysterious majesty of the music, and the sacrifice offered at the altar.

These symbols appealed to her profoundly, but she could not grasp a single satisfying idea. They soared around her, above her, like the music ; they escaped her as the incense would have done had she tried to hold it ; there was nothing she could touch, nothing she could make hers.

Again the question came to her : M. d'Isten was a Catholic, could he really hold fast by this ?

She looked up straight and full into his eyes. The glance startled him ; he did not understand what it meant. Here was a side of her nature which, with all his quick perceptions, he could not read.

Her eyes fell, disappointed. She turned over a few pages of her book without noticing them. Then these words caught her eyes :

"By two wings man is lifted up from things earthly : Simplicity and purity. Simplicity ought to be in our intention ; purity in our affection. Simplicity doth seek God ; purity doth find and apprehend Him."

"See !" she whispered.

Her face was beaming ; her eyes shone with a delicious sweetness. He looked to where she pointed. Why should these words have produced such a transfiguration ? Did she really want God so much ?

He took the book gently, and found a page which he gave her to read.

"Love is a great thing, yea, a great and thorough good ; by itself it makes everything that is heavy light, and it bears with equal serenity all the circumstances of life.

"Nothing is sweeter than love, nothing more courageous, nothing higher, nothing wider, nothing more pleasant, nothing fuller nor better in heaven or earth ; because love is born of God, and cannot rest but in God, above all His creations."

Bethesda's eyes were blind with tears when she finished. How well he understood her ! If she only could love God.

Perhaps she did. It seemed to her that anything would be easy to bear if she could only be sure God existed, so that she might love Him. If she could see Jesus, how gladly she would throw herself at His feet, and kiss them, and weep over them ! But God ? He was so far away !

She dared not trust herself to look anywhere but on her book, or she might have seen a flash of sudden jealousy on M. d'Isten's face.

"That is truer to me of my friends than of God," he whispered hurriedly.

She did not distinguish the words, for a thunderous peal of the organ just then rolled through the temple. The sudden start shook two big tears on to her cheeks, and when she had brushed them away, and turned her chaste eyes up to him, he had for the moment no desire greater than that she should not know what he had said. Her purity of soul must not be disturbed.

From the church their landau took them out through the Champs Elysées, beyond the Bois, and on into the country, by roads which M. d'Isten's schoolboy days had taught him.

They came finally to a group of trees on a bank above the Seine. The city lay concealed behind them ; no house was in sight, but blue wreaths of smoke beyond a hillock told of a noonday meal. A suburban village was not far off, the coachman said ; he would put up his horses there. Marcot was a devoted retainer of M. d'Isten's (the ladies did not know this), and was perfectly reliable. He carried rugs and shawls down to the shady nook by the river, and then drove away.

When he had disappeared there was not a sign of human life but that delicate, treacherous smoke.

M. d'Isten arranged everything in the most convenient manner for the ladies, and then threw himself at their feet with a sigh of content which Bethesda noticed. She had been unusually silent ever since they left the church, but the quietude was of pleasure. These Sundays were delightful holidays to her ; how dear they were she did not know until afterwards. Her aunt was in the especial humour for it to-day, and they both enjoyed watching René d'Isten, whose air of self-possessed distinction never left him, while he relaxed under the influence of nature, and became dreamy and content.

"What would Madame de la R——, and Mesdemoiselles

de St. H——, who suppose you so repressed and unapproachable, think now?" asked Mabel, smiling at his luxurious sense of *abandon*.

"Truly it would be a revelation to them," answered René, his head on his hand and his eyes reposing on Bethesda's clasped hands. "One does not know me to the depths," he continued presently. "It is no marvel, for I did not know myself."

"Do you think, then, that you know yourself now?"

"I am learning; you teach me fast."

He included them both in a quiet glance, and then let his eyes fall to the river sweeping almost silently past their feet. It met with no obstacles to cause it to show its strength.

"What are you thinking about now?" asked Mabel idly.

"My unbuilt castle by the sea," he responded, without hesitation. "I often visit it. Every stone is as known to me as this stream. The ocean is frothing now around the base of the precipice, for it is calm; but in stormy weather it dashes its spray even to the windows, a hundred and fifty feet above."

"Windows! It's all window there now, isn't it?"

"Not in my dreams. The castle, and the chapel, and the lighthouse are built, and inhabited, too, then. Do you know by what name I shall call them?"

"The last I heard it was as undecided as the rest of it. Some fanciful idea you have now, I suppose?"

She spoke carelessly, but he answered with slow impressiveness:

"It is a beautiful name; I have chosen it after long consideration. It is—Béthesda."

"Not really!" exclaimed Beth.

"You will let me?"

"I could not possibly object," she said a little slowly.

"Do you remember in Florence, Madame Mabelle, when you first told me your niece wrote, and that she used her own name, Béthesda?"

His foreign tongue lent this Hebrew word a sweetness of pronunciation which was not lost on the ladies, and which he seemed pleased to linger over.

"You said," he continued, "that she had always associated some meaning, as yet unknown, with her name, and the story in the Holy Bible. Last night I thought of this, and of the

beacon I am to build off a dangerous coast. It will guide weary mariners to safety ; it will restore hope to the despairing, and they will bless the name it bears. I could think of none so fitted to it as Béthesda. Le Château de Béthesda ; la Phare de Béthesda."

He looked up with the dreaminess of his tone in his dark eyes, and met Bethesda's. They reminded him of some shadowed cove of the shore near his home, where the limpid water lay deep and still, only the tide throbbing far beneath the glinting surface.

"I don't see why, if you are going to build really, you banish yourself to that out-of-the-world coast," said Mrs. Trescott in a practical tone. "Why don't you buy a place in Brittany or Normandy, where it would be fashionable, and you could spend the summer months? Madame d'Isten might join you then."

"She does not like the sea. She prefers her present position to any other." He gave Mrs. Trescott a glance of reminder, and then continued : "This is to be my castle ; I shall have it for my own. I may not live in it long during the year, but I shall have a consciousness of its existence ; of a place that I can go to at any time and be at rest."

"What a dreamer you are !" exclaimed Mabel, somewhat impatiently. "You might do a great deal better work with your money. And besides, how are you going to explain giving your 'castle' such a fantastic name?"

"Is it fantastic, madame? However, if persons are inquisitive I shall know how to silence them. To my friends I shall say it is my *nom de plume*, and that I choose to name my castle the same."

"Le grand seigneur !" laughed Mabel. Then sobering : "So you will say frankly that 'Bethesda' is your *nom de plume*? Shall you tell your wife of this compact? Have you decided to adopt it? You must each think for yourselves, you know. Beth read me this morning what she had written ; will you?"

Mrs. Trescott spoke hastily. The subject had been avoided until she seized this opportunity.

"I will read it to you both one of these days," said René. "I am resolved upon the compact, if mademoiselle consents, and I am assured she will."

His eyes met Bethesda's in a sure claiming, and she re-

peated with the almost solemn gravity with which she had read the words to her aunt :

“Yes, I accept the compact.”

René d'Isten sprang to his feet as the words passed her lips, thus giving expression to the bound of soul within him. To such words he could trust ; his aim was reached.

“Thank you, Béthesda,” he said, standing close beside her, and there was an intonation in his voice which Beth presently learned she alone could cause.

Days passed, June came and brooded with a delicious sweetness over land and sea ; over flowers of the earth and flowers of the mind. Nature unclosed, and let the warm sunbeams steal into the furl of every leaf ; white lilacs bloomed and filled all Paris with their perfume ; roses smoothed their creased young petals, and expanded their delicate filaments in rich development. Everything, in fact, was redolent of life, and shook into the air new vitality, and beauty, and strength.

The compact concluded between René d'Isten and Bethesda drew them more and more intimately together. It was as if an isthmus had been cut away and the waves of two seas were allowed to flow freely into one another. Each hour of intercourse told, by some driftweed of conversation, how far the waters of one had advanced into the other, and every sign spoke of a surprising distance traversed.

Mrs. Trescott felt them gradually receding from her, and towards one another, but was unable to do anything to avert the danger, if danger it was. The isthmus was gone ; nothing was to be done now but watch and wait. It would not be long anyway ; they were to sail in a month or six weeks. She supported herself, meantime, by the belief that two such extraordinary beings as were her niece and her friend, could do extraordinary things without ordinary results ; and ignored the sovereignty of natural laws.

But it was a necessity to her to “speak her mind,” and she did so, both to René and Bethesda. She only spoke, however ; and, in constant references to what might be the dangers to others, let none of their tendencies come upon them with the enlightening shock of surprise, but thus blunted their sensibilities, and helped them to remain, ethically, asleep.

René d'Isten, however, was not wholly asleep. He had recognised very clearly, on the evening of announcing his plan,

that it would lead Bethesda and himself to a unity of more than minds. He saw the inevitability of growth in a sprouting plant, unless some one pulled it up by the roots, against which catastrophe he guarded with utmost care. For he did not think it wrong that this beautiful *arbuste* should grow and blossom; the fruit alone would be wrong to touch. And he had no fears that either of them would be tempted to touch it. Bethesda was pure as an angel, and he was going to be unlike other men. Had he not been, all his life? Why should he now become commonplace and vulgar, just when all the best in him was stimulated and increased? Bah! it was sacrilege to think of it!

Not one of the three realised the importance of thoughts, how they are only the buds of deeds, and that, even if they never reach fruition, their fragrance may be fatal. Not one of them recognised that it is possible to transgress all the commandments of every school of morality in one's heart, yet keep the outward life irreproachable.

Still the instinct of principle, the moral sense, which responds, as the intellect does not, to the actual right and wrong, will not let one transgress without remonstrance. Night after night Bethesda knelt in her open window, and let the stifled conflict surge within her. If at any time she had known it absolutely to be wrong, she could have summoned strength enough to break off the whole affair and leave the city. But there was nothing to assure her it was wrong. Her aunt vacillated; she herself felt the purity of her intentions, and an utter confidence in René; and he did not speak.

For M. d'Isten was one of those men who did not deceive, he only did not expose. He considered that character which allows its whole self to be seen by any one who cares to look, as a boorish, ungraceful, and almost immoral one. Garments, he would have said, are as necessary to the soul as to the body in civilised society. We cannot go around telling our inmost thoughts, or holding up our hands, that each person may read our fortunes in our palms. Let us drape ourselves as gracefully as may be, and then we will respect ourselves and one another vastly more.

Only, such a man would not say any of this, he would live it; and this is what others are to see and understand, and guide their own actions accordingly; and it is also what neither Mabel nor Bethesda did.

CHAPTER XIII.

“What might have been is sad indeed ;
What should have been is sadder still ;
The happiness our spirits need
Is not of circumstance, but will.”

“Your pity is the suffering mother of love : its anguish is the very natal pang of the divine passion.”—*Jane Eyre*.

ONE evening, in the second week of their compact, the conversation drifted, or was guided, towards what they were first to write in unison. The letters were already arranged ; in fact, one had been written the previous week, worked up from René's notes and Beth's observation into what was really excellent, and pleased Mrs. Trescott hardly less than it did the double Bethesda.

But both were eager to commence something more notable and continuous ; something they could plan now and execute later.

Bethesda suggested a story.

“A story it shall be,” said René, delighted. “But what will we treat ? What shall be chosen for the subject ?”

Bethesda gave an outline which she had already sketched.

“No,” objected René, with a smile, “we must have something original to the new Béthesda. I am going to be very jealous of what you have already thought. Let me give you the germ ; that is my prerogative. Let it be a story based on my life.”

“But, René ! I never could write that !”

“Pardon me ; I am convinced no one could do it so well. Besides, I shall help you !” and he plunged into the scheme with ardour, for autobiography comes easiest to an inexperienced writer.

“I shall tell you all,” he said ; “I shall give you my opinion of what has passed, and you can sift them, throw away what is useless, and keep what you can make good. You shall judge me and my actions, and write freely from yourself, as well as from me. It will clarify everything, and let light on the underground world of the past. Come, it will be excellent !”

Was there some hidden reason why he wished her to know

him thus intimately? Or was it only an artist's fervid desire to paint what he knew best?

Bethesda remembered the secret in his life, and hesitated.

"There must be no concealments," he resumed, more gravely. "You shall be my conscience, to dictate where I have done wrong, and where I should alter my conduct in the future. You need say nothing, but put it in the work, and I shall understand. You shall know everything, *Béthesda*, as I know it myself. If expression fails me, your insight will abundantly compensate. But, above all things, be frank. Do not fear to write as you think; speak as you would to yourself. I shall understand each word, and shall be grateful to you for making my duties easier to perform."

His voice had fallen into that low and persuasive intonation which ever leaned on the tenderest chords of the woman's heart. Long ago she had said it left her no power, or even wish, to refuse. So she consented, faintly. Her fears for her literary incapacity were mingled with a somewhat weakening premonition of the events she would have to hear. She looked forward to it with an indefinable dread. Could she bear to see him so worked upon as her aunt had described when he brought her from proud anger to tears that first night in Florence, so long, long ago?

But once her consent won, René had resumed his interested manner. He said they must begin immediately; there never was a better time than the present—when the present was good. She could make her notes now, and he would look them over to see there were no incorrect impressions. He roused her from her passivity by threatening to look through her desk for pencil and note-book, and by the time they were seated, René to talk and the ladies to listen, the three were in thorough harmony.

He spoke with admirable perspicuity and ease; each incident was pointed by that inimitable French faculty of seizing the very arrowhead of thought to which the language lends itself in an unequalled manner. There were many delicately-drawn sketches of scenery, surroundings, and character which Bethesda despaired of reproducing. At first she dotted down this and that fact, a duty of which René had frequently to remind her, until he too became so absorbed that the page before her remained empty.

His father was already a familiar character, and the little he knew of his mother had been reverently communicated to them. But now, in leading them through the galleries of memory, he could not truthfully refrain from pointing out shadows and sadder pictures which hung there.

They commenced early. He was sent from home when his father remarried, and had first seen France, a shivering child of six, under the care of an old priest who knew nothing of children, and had neglected him during the whole journey. Still, he loved France from the first, why he could hardly say.

"It must have been in the little boy a feeling such as the maiden had when she wished to kiss the ground at Dieppe," said René, smiling at Beth.

The little fellow remained in the school at Paris for eight years, without leaving it even in vacations, and it was only on the occurrence of his sister's fatal illness that his father sent for him to come to Algiers. He went, but reached home only in time to see his sister lying at rest among the flowers, in her casket; and to wish, for a while, that he might lie there too.

His only possible companion seemed gone in the death of this person, to whom alone, in her frequent visits to Paris, he had been able to speak freely. His step-brothers, educated by their mother to look upon him with envy and dislike, avoided him; his stepmother herself showed a petty spite towards him, and his grief bit deeper and deeper into his heart. But his father, looking up from the blow of the loss of his favourite child, found her little brother in this sorry condition, and from that time the boy was never allowed to leave him when they could possibly be together. René had always felt that his sister's tenderness and his mother's memory went hand in hand with his father's new solicitude.

Two years passed in the delightful intercourse of a youthful mind with a man in every way superior. An ardent passion soon possessed the boy for his father, who became his world. Gaiety of spirits bloomed, thought developed, independence strengthened, as he felt the desire to make himself an agreeable companion, and a son of whom his father need not be ashamed. Meanwhile he disarmed his stepmother's prejudices, and won his brothers heartily to his side.

At the end of this time his father thought it necessary that he should again take up his studies; but unwilling to send him

so far away as Paris, he consigned him to a learned monastery by the sea, near the family estates, and in the corner of the Pyrenees which had become so dear to René.

Here he passed a studious thoughtful period, filled with alternate hours of reading and solitary wanderings along the shore, filled with sombre romance, in which the atmosphere of renunciation, the gray thundering ocean, the majestic rocks, and his wholly introspective life, combined to accentuate the grave cast of character which peculiarly distinguished him.

Of women he knew almost nothing. The memory of his mother and sister had never been deposed—in fact had never been approached. In Paris he had seen no women; in Algeria the white-garmented and veiled creatures were like wraiths to him; and during his vacations his stepmother and her coterie were so dissimilar to his tastes that they produced no impression upon him. Perhaps from the cloistered monks, their stories and legends, he had learned more of women than in any other way; and he had seen none who could for an instant be compared with the ideal being whom saintly stories and lonely musings had formed and almost endowed with life.

On finishing his education his father offered him the choice of travel or Paris. He declined both. He wished to be gradually introduced to that stream of life which had so long been flowing past his secluded retreat without his knowing more of it than its murmur. So he asked his father to let him go to the town near by to mingle freely in the society then assembled there.

Permission was readily granted. His father wished him to marry young, and advised him to seek a wife, not alone French, but from the Midi, who would be his own from the dearest mutual associations. He told him, however, it behoved him not to be in haste, but to remember his inexperience, his responsibilities, and to consult those wiser than he. Still he appreciated the uses and delights of a youthful marriage, and would have been glad to have his son seek a similar experience to that which had given him his own greatest happiness.

“Beware of taking a heartless woman, no matter what her charms. Find a wife like your blessed mother, and I ask nothing more for you,” he said, when they parted.

René immediately set up a bachelor's establishment in T——, and was warmly received in society, where his name was well

known, and his father's friends many. He was courted and *fêted*, and introduced at once to all the eligible maidens of the country round.

An elderly marchioness, who had been a lifelong friend of his father's, took him especially under her care. To her he spoke freely : he told her that his fixed idea was to find a wife who should be not so much a society queen as a womanly woman ; he told her of his hopes and fears, and explained why he did not seek Paris instead of this provincial place, which she pressed him to do. He would have a wider choice there, she urged, and he should "see Paris" before he settled ; he would be better satisfied then.

But his determination was unshakable ; he had no desire to know Parisian life ; rather, he wished to marry young so that he should have no temptation to ever know it ; and moreover, he wished his wife to be from southern France, with its warmth and devotion, and not a frivolous leader of society.

So the marchioness turned her energies in another direction, and studied all her young acquaintances with the eye of a connoisseur, resolved to find him a suitable wife.

He, meantime, took the matter into his own hands.

At a ball one night he saw a new face, brilliant with warm emotions and joyousness of spirits. She was dancing with a young hussar, and they made a notable couple. He found on inquiry that she was the daughter of a rich Spanish merchant, who had married into a French family ennobled by the first empire. He was ambitious, the world said, and resolved that his daughter should marry at least as high as her mother's rank. To this all her education had tended. She was an only child, carefully reared, accomplished, and beautiful, as he could see. The blood that ran in her veins was said to make her ambitious also, and the haughty condescension with which she was received by her mother's equals rasped on her unbearably, and it was asserted that her aim was to compel them to a more conciliatory position.

In spite of these rumours René d'Isten, interested by her face, and indignant at her undeserved humiliation, sought an introduction. He was welcomed with *empressement*. The father was flattered, the mother pleased ; the daughter did not seem to object to his advances. But the marchioness was seriously alarmed.

She summoned René to her, and at the very first remonstrated strongly. Here was not the woman to make him a domestic wife, to answer his devotion with affection, to chain him with new ties of sweetness to his home and land. This woman was an intriguer; she would marry the highest title, and care little who possessed it. Well, if she would not, since he defended her there, her parents would, and he well knew it was all the same.

René d'Isten listened, and said he would consider, and went to judge critically this woman. Was she maligned by popular report? or had he heard the truth from his good friend the marchioness?

He found mother and daughter together. The mother's delicate blandishments and fascinations prejudiced him in her favour, while the daughter's contrasting manner seemed to him more truly maidenly than anything he had yet seen, and impressed upon him the assurance that she would never yield herself to an ambitious marriage, and would love passionately if once aroused. He would be the chivalrous knight who would reconcile parents and child, and rescue the beauteous damsel from her distressing position. Now the marchioness could no longer affect him: he had espoused a cause, and nothing would detach him from it.

Bref, he pressed his suit and won the consent of the parents, who gave it eagerly, and of the daughter, who showed a shy reserve very attractive to him. He saw his *fiancée* only in swift moments, however, and the mother much more intimately. She was continually talking of Louise, praising her deftly; laying open apparently the girl's whole life for his reverent inspection, and he looked at the pages she turned and was content. The visionary ideal he had formed was thrown into the background; reality effaced imagination, and a happy temperament surrounded the reality with a glamour of golden possibilities.

Louise was dignified, reserved, unapproachable: he thought them all qualities of virgin self-respect. Her wit, which was tinged with bitterness, he thought the result of her position, from which she would soon be freed. Her joyous gaiety disappeared: he thought it the steadying effect of new ties upon an earnest nature. When she vouchsafed him a glance he thought its dark tumult meant a conflict between feeling and

maidenly reticence, and eagerly anticipated the time when she should give full liberty to a delicious emotion.

Somewhat to his surprise, however, her parents were the ones to urge a speedy union. It was now deep into the summer; the town was almost deserted. The marchioness, among others, had gone away a little angry, hoping that before long René would awake from his delusion.

But the future mother-in-law invited M. d'Isten to their new and magnificent castle amid the grand scenery of the mountains, just the other side of the French boundary, and once there they persuaded him to consent to an immediate marriage. His father, whom he had wished to have meet his *fiancée*, was absent on important affairs, and wrote anxious letters; but when René asked him, as the first favour of his life, to acquiesce in this consummation of his hopes, he did so, although reluctantly.

The ceremony was to be performed in the new and gorgeous chapel. The whole estate was resplendently illuminated; the house was thrown open, and filled with light and flowers from turret to hall. A vast concourse of persons was invited, and hastened to come. René's step-brothers were there, but his father and the old marchioness could not be present, and they were the only two real friends the bridegroom felt he had.

At last, amid the splendour, the bride appeared. She was pallid even to grayness; her lips were compressed, her eyes glittering. Superbly dressed, her figure drawn to its haughtiest height, and her whole bearing that of extreme effort at self-command, she looked handsomer than ever before,—and yet she made him shudder from head to foot.

But it was too late for hesitation.

When they met at the altar it would have been difficult to say which hand was the coldest, which self-control the most tense. For his part, he could remember nothing of the ceremony, nothing of responses or oaths.

He saw nothing, heard nothing, until, when the blessing was pronounced, Louise muttered low, he knew, yet it could not have deafened him more had it been shrieked:

“God, strike me dead!”

René pushed his chair suddenly aside, and rose. Bethesda, whose wide eyes had been fixed on him, dropped them with a

shuddering sigh. Her soul was a sea of pity, which dashed its spray even over herself.

Mabel looked from one to the other, and then said slowly:

“Poor creature!”

“Yes,” responded René, turning towards them, and leaning on the high back of Mrs. Trescott’s chair; “I never grieved for any one as I did for Louise at that moment. I thought of nothing except that she was in agony,—and that she was my wife.”

He seated himself again, and continued.

For the rest of the evening each sense was acutely clear, each nerve strained to do its duty, in shielding her and himself. For the moment they were more completely identified than any other circumstance could have made them.

Her stern self-command did not again leave her. In spite of the heat, the excitement, and the merry supper, not the faintest colour tinged her face; but, as the hours passed, her eyes glittered more and more dangerously.

M. d’Isten kept her constantly in sight; his watchfulness did not importune, nor did it leave her. He, too, was discharging his duties with successful self-mastery. That one instant, flaming over the past, and lighting the future with a cruel glare, had taught him more in concealment than had his whole previous life of twenty-two years. All the force his nature might possess was suddenly called into action, and it did not fail him. The guests who had anticipated, it may be, a brilliant scandal, as a continuance of the present entertainment, saw the young husband already assuming the responsibilities of his position, and doubted any further amusement. Had they done otherwise they would have been disappointed, remarked René d’Isten quietly.

It had been a stipulation, made by the parents, that their only child should not be taken from them, but that the newly-married couple should, for a time at least, reside in their home. They were to return to a suite of apartments provided for them, after a honeymoon spent at the d’Isten’s château, thirty miles away. The next morning they would leave, escorted half-way by a gay cavalcade of the marriage guests, but this night they were to pass where the wedding had taken place.

M. d’Isten spent it entirely in his wife’s antechamber, either pacing noiselessly from corner to corner, or standing in

the open window. The room was dark, for nothing must betray their miserable secret. This was the one point on which he was resolved.

In his abstraction of fierce thought he at one time brushed the *portières* hanging before the door opening into the room where she was. He recoiled from the touch; it seemed to poison him. He leaned far out of the window, to reach the pure night air. He was still, but every sense was electrically alive. The slightest sound, or touch, sent a shock through him as if it had been from a battery.

In this state he could decide nothing; but a tidal wave of irresistible feeling rolled up, and marked with a deep line the resolve to know all, and the determination that his name should not be stained.

The short summer night wore away, and the dawn came. Birds sang exultingly; trees and flowers gleamed in the growing light; a damp breeze blew over the forest, and refreshed his hot brain. He longed to be away, amid the everlastingness of nature. He would have given much for a ride over the desert, through that grand monotony which dwarfs and stills human suffering.

But the forest and the hills would be something. He changed his clothing, and went out from the terrace window. For hours he wandered through the morning glades, with nature smiling in his face, and the birds carolling overhead. His electric susceptibility decreased here, where all was the same as for years and years. A forest could not be made, or destroyed, in a day, an hour, an instant. How long had it taken her to speak those words? He wondered over it, in a curiously minute calculation, which absorbed his whole mind. Presently he roused himself with a start. Anything was better than this idiocy, this appalling weakness. He *must* have presence of mind.

He remained in the forest until the fiery spell, which alternated with this apathy, was quenched, and he knew he could depend upon his mind. In a few hours he would be alone with his wife; then all should be explained. No decision could be made until facts were clearly known.

He returned to the house. Numerous domestics were stirring lazily. He contrived to elude them all, and to return by the terrace without being seen. He performed a scrupulous

toilette, for appearances were now everything. Then he forced himself to read, and understand, a book on some scientific question in which he had been interested, until the morning was far advanced.

A valet came and knocked loudly. M. d'Isten dismissed him, and then tapped on his wife's door.

It opened almost immediately. Madame d'Isten, dressed for her journey, stood before him. She met his grave eyes with a glance of defiance and curiosity combined; he read her shrewdly now. He asked if he might speak with her, and she gave a silent acquiescence, sending away her maid by a gesture.

He entered the room with a firm step, and took the seat to which she motioned him. Each instant she shot inquiring glances at him, her defiance gradually disappearing, and her curiosity replaced by something like fear. He did not wish this.

"Madame," he said, "you consented to become my wife. You wear my name. We are married. Whatever may seem strange to you or me we must conceal from the world. This is due to your dignity and mine, and to the name we both now bear. I trust you agree with me?"

"Certainly," was the laconic response.

"Every incident will take place as expected by your guests. Women understand dissimulation; it is not necessary to say more. Shall I take you to the breakfast-room, madame?"

She was somewhat confused. The sullen look which had gathered on her face while he spoke was broken by conflicting sentiments.

He awaited her pleasure. It was desirable that her confidences should be postponed until they were alone; but, if she chose, it should be now.

After a moment she rose with an energy which threw down her chair. M. d'Isten picked it up in silence. He opened the doors for her to pass, and, when they reached the gallery gave her his arm. They were immediately joined by a gay bevy, and did not see each other again alone until they arrived at his château—the place selected for the bringing home of his beautiful bride, and the fondly-anticipated honeymoon.

Little by little, only by the utmost tact and timing of her moods was the confidence he had determined upon securing,

given him. He studied her with care. Nothing escaped him ; no trait was manifested that did not print itself on his mind with painful distinctness. She took it for granted that he had learned—how she could not guess, not knowing she had spoken aloud in that supreme moment—her secret, and, won by the sympathy which he sincerely gave her, relieved herself in an impetuous outpouring. Through it he discovered what she supposed he already knew.

It was a story bitterly common he knew now ; then it seemed to him terribly strange.

She had met and loved a sub-officer stationed in the town where she was at school. They bribed the woman who walked out with the class to connive at their clandestine meetings, and had sworn undying fidelity. In parting she had promised to use all her influence to win her parents' consent to their marriage. She returned to her home, and was immediately surrounded by adulation, and her parents' ambitious intrigues. They refused her request with scorn, and pricked her pride to a greater aim. She wrote her lover, presently, that he must win her by making a name ; and he, in return, reproached her for her lack of affection, but assured her that, if she would but wait, he would make a name she need not be ashamed to accept.

During the year which ensued she refused many good offers, and won the name of a person who could only be secured at a high price, while she was, she affirmed, only keeping faith with a man whose patent of nobility was love.

Then Monsieur le Comte d'Isten, heir to the title of marquis, appeared. His name and position, she acknowledged, were not without their effect upon her. In fact, her ambition, her pride, her desire for power, had been powerful advocates of his cause. Her love, however, struggled rebelliously under the weight of alien thoughts, and would have conquered had not its death-blow been dealt, and her better nature ruined, by her mother's machinations. She told her daughter that her lover had deserted her and was betrothed to another woman.

"And she believed it?" exclaimed Bethesda.

"She did. Had she not, I think she would have refused my titles. She loved him well enough for that."

"But not well enough to believe in him," murmured the girl involuntarily.

"No," answered René gravely ; "few women have the

capacity to love another better than themselves. Louise is not one of the few ; she has many sisters in character."

There was a pause. Bethesda did not speak again. M. d'Isten went on.

Despair and rage made the deceived woman willing to submit to her parents' urging of a speedy marriage. She would be married first. The traitor should see that she was not to be left thus scornfully to break her heart unconsolated.

But on the very evening of their marriage, when she was already dressed for the ceremony, a letter had been secretly handed to her, and the lover explained, in the agonised language of truth, that he was not unfaithful ; that the story of his new betrothment was a fable of her mother's ; that he had been promoted, and transferred to a regiment which would be quartered in the town of S—— ; and that he was then awaiting her in the park, ready to rescue her from the ignominy of this marriage, and replace it by one where her love, at least, would support her ; if she slipped from the house, if only for a moment, he would save her at the cost of his life, and even hers. It was better that she should die than sell her soul.

She suffered tortures while the few moments lingered during which she could have gained her freedom and saved the happiness of at least three lives.

But they passed unimproved. She was still convulsed in the throes of alternate ambition and love when her solitude was invaded and the crisis was over. She must now become Madame la Comtesse d'Isten. She bent to her destiny, which brought her a title and married freedom, and her wretched new life began.

She was never for an instant content. Her satisfied ambition left her defenceless before the onslaughts of her outraged love. The honeymoon passed in torrents of tears and convulsions of remorse. Always for herself and her lover. The thought of her husband never occurred to her except as an object of interference. He recognised it, and kept himself strictly in the background.

The one thing, meantime, which she commanded, beseeched, implored, was that her husband should let her live in the city where she could see *him* pass ; where, at the theatre, their eyes might meet ; where she could know whether he was dead or

alive ; and then she swore by her religion, by her love itself, that she would remember whose wife she was, and that her husband should never have cause to complain.

M. d'Isten took time to consider. He understood the character with which he had to deal, and he deliberately marked out the hard lines of his changed life. He would let her have her will, and would do everything in his power, by patience and kindness, so long as she kept her word, to win his wife's affection, if not her love.

So he consented to her desires. When, in the long years that followed, she would spring from her chair and rush to the window at the sound of a horse's hoofs and a sabre, he would fix his eyes on the opposite wall and never stir. When, at the theatre, she blushed and her face was stirred by emotion, he would never seek the place where she had looked, but rather let his eyes fall that he might not see too much. Even when she would throw herself on his neck and pour out her sorrow and her undying regret for —, he would stop her with tender firmness, and insist that she should never mention that name.

With a kindness he tried to make invariable with constant study, and a yearning she never suspected, he endeavoured to win the affection which was still hers to give. His attentions were those of a yet unaccepted suitor. In no way did he exercise any marital authority except one : he made her understand that the instant anything occurred to compromise his honour he would put her away. She had not failed. Once, in a fit of desperation, she was about to leave him, but the flight was prevented ; she knew not how. She never dreamed that he knew it, but there was nothing she did which he did not know. He had his honour to guard, and it had not been betrayed.

For four years he devoted himself to nothing but his wife, and for success he was granted the knowledge that at any time she would have inwardly rejoiced at his death, and that she found life so unendurable that she had often threatened to kill herself, and he had even taken a pistol from her hand when he had once unexpectedly returned to her side.

Such was the domesticity marriage had brought him ; the home which had taken the place of his glowing visions ; the reality that had usurped his ideals.

At the end of four years every expedient had been tried

which a hearty will could suggest. All had ignominiously failed. There only remained now to change all the circumstances and influences around them, and see what would ensue.

René went to pay a long-delayed visit to his father. The years since his marriage had been intensely reserved, self-reliant years. Everything had been done from himself; no one was his confidant or counsellor. He had not been away from Louise except for the few bloody weeks of the war; but now he made a long visit to his beloved parent.

He then expressed to him his desire to choose a vocation which should actively employ him, and signified his willingness to follow his father's advice. The marquis was overjoyed, and immediately obtained for his son a position under one of the finest statesmen in France; a confidential position, which he hoped would lead to the highest honours.

When this was arranged René d'Isten returned to his wife, and asked her to accompany him to Paris. She refused, with a torrent of passion. He then quietly forced her to see the life she was compelling him to lead, and the misery to which she was subjecting herself. He acquainted her with his resolve to try a change. He had submitted to her wishes in large and small things, only to increase their mutual unhappiness. She must, in this instance, submit to him. He was going where his duties called him; she should accompany him. Once in Paris he would do all in his power to help her to find pleasure or relief from *ennui*; but to Paris she must go.

Of course she did so ultimately, but she apparently exhausted herself in finding the means to render the preparations and the journey disagreeable. In Paris her days were spent in weeping or tempests of anger, her only aim being to make it so trying to her husband that he would perforce let her return home.

He meantime kept his promise in providing her with every distraction, but his manner had changed from what it had been. He was no longer the suitor, but the husband. He wished to make a complete alteration in their lives, and allow his will to become active where it had been so long passive. But no change could fulfil his hope of winning her affection, and, after six months of unceasing struggle he escorted her back to her parents, and returned to Paris alone.

"Our lives now flow in the separate channels she has

made," he said, "and they probably will to the end. I do all I can for her. I write often; I visit her frequently; she is not cramped or coerced in any way but the one: since she wears my name it must be blamelessly. I have tried to be a good husband."

"You are an ideal husband," exclaimed Mabel, the tears again standing in her eyes. "I cannot imagine one more self-abnegating or noble. Tell Beth the last. You must not forget your crowning sacrifice. Tell her why you went to Rome."

"I should not easily forget my going there, since it brought what has proved to be the happiest period of my life. I went to Rome to see a French General then on a mission there. The man Louise loved had been ordered to be exchanged into an Algerian regiment. He had made a serious mistake—disobedience it was called—and the punishment was temporary exile. Louise was distracted with grief at the prospect, and beseeched me to use my influence in his behalf. It was not easy for me to do, but I undertook it. It might be a providential chance for her affection. If this would not win her, nothing could. I went to Rome, and remained there some time, as you know. When I had gained the favour I heard from Louise. My efforts made no impression on her, except, indeed, that she upbraided me for lack of zeal in being so slow. That severed the last link which bound my hopes to her. It became of small consequence whether she liked or disliked me, and I felt freed from a nightmare of ignominy to be dependent no longer. The man understood my position better. He wrote to me, and I need fear him no more. Then I came to Florence and met you."

He looked full at Bethesda with an indescribable expression of gratitude. Her eyes were wide with pain, her cheeks were flushed, her hair pushed back as it had been from an unconscious gesture of distress. She had been leaning forward in a listening intentness, but now she rose.

For an instant she lingered by René's chair. He felt her brooding over him with a tenderness of overwhelming pity.

"My pool of Béthesda," he said, in a very low tone.

An irradiation as of white light crossed her features. It flashed and disappeared, and she went quickly away.

René d'Isten always held that he had seen the gleam of an angel's wing reflected in her face.

CHAPTER XIV.

“ In Godhead rise, thither flow back
All loves, which, as they keep or lack,
In their return, the course assigned
Are virtue or sin.”—COVENTRY PATMORE.

“ The light and darkness in our chaos joined,
What shall divide? The God within the mind.”—POPE.

THE change this culminating confidence made in the mutual relations of all three was unmistakable; and yet, to an outsider, it might have seemed to have had no effect. It was only a question of delight when Bethesda and René were together; when they were apart doubts came.

René felt deeply that the sorrows of his life were being compensated. His fate had been accepted when it was hardest; now, when it was rendered brilliant and beautiful by the glad devotion of a pure heart, he put from him all thought of regret. This impotent emotion, indeed, experience had long since taught him to look upon as deplorable weakness, and he was not going to be weak,—no, far from it. He would be unlike other men.

This was what whetted his resolution not to let his heart gain ascendancy over his head, which he was very well aware was the tendency of such close sympathy as now subsisted between himself and Bethesda. He had no doubt of his power to control himself. His life had taught him to crush all buds of passion before they were large enough to enervate his strength, and he thought he could trust himself without any danger in the society of this woman who each hour made him feel more blessed.

In looking back he could hardly believe his fate had been at last so kind to him. Long ago he had been forced to relinquish the thought of seeing his ideal realised. Not alone his unfortunate marriage, but also his contact with a frivolous and desecrated society, had made such visions seem baseless and impossible. He had never lost sight of his dreams; in fact, his marriage, in throwing him back on himself so completely as it had done, restored them with only more radiant colouring; but he had learned to regard them as poetic fancies, not to be

found living and treading the pathways of this world. Then, in the midst of his shattered anticipations, which he regarded with resignation; in the midst of a society he despised; in the most barren period of his life, appeared his vision, incarnate, and he was allowed to enter her intimacy.

He was the first; the first who had been able to sway her; the first that had conquered her from herself; the first who had known how to cross the mystic stream about her impregnable castle and claim a welcome from its regal inmate.

And Bethesda, meantime, had not an even dim conception of where she was being led. While René was fortifying himself, realising at least somewhat of the strength of the test he was undergoing, Bethesda had not dreamed of there being any test. She knew, of course, that such union of minds as this might become, would probably, *in other circumstances*, mean union of hearts as well. "But," she thought, quite simply, "the possibility of this with us is precluded;" never thinking that circumstances are like straw, to be burned by passion or whirled away by the wind of free-will.

Her life, however, was now a turmoil. The fires beneath were making the straw crackle, and hot springs bubble up through the cool waters of innocence and purity. She would kneel in the window till her brain refused longer to think, and she threw herself on the bed, to awaken late in the morning with a jubilant sense that the hour drew near when she should again see René, and all questioning would be at rest; at least until she was again delivered to the solitary midnight battle.

And Mrs. Trescott thought that it might be a second Dante and Beatrice, and still half reluctantly consented. The two did not meet except in Mabel's presence; but with the unveiling of the secret which had separated them like a phantom during all their previous intercourse, the most complete confidence was established. Truly René told Bethesda all. Each minute circumstance that he could describe, every unimportant incident, found a listening ear, an unbounded sympathy, and a proper place in the annals of his life. This was the excuse which accounted for the transference of absolute knowledge from him to her, not alone of circumstances and intentions, but faults and penitent confessions. She became quite literally his conscience.

It has been well said that we expect one faculty to do the work of another in mental and moral life. Especially in regard to the functions of reason and conscience do we make this mistake. The conscience "is not alone expected to enforce doing what is right, but to decide what the right is." Now this was precisely Bethesda's fault. She looked to her conscience as the leader of morality—its judge instead of its executor. She referred her daily life, and the lives of those with whom she came in contact, to her conscience instead of her reason. The latter was utterly untaught. Mrs. Trescott had in many ways a high disdain for pure reason, and was apt to apply the term "reasonable" to anything she wished to do, and the term "unreasonable" to that which any one else wished to do in conflict with her desires.

But fortunately reason does not consist of this fluctuating quantity. It is the one absolute principle which thrones itself above all others, and judges with accurate impartiality. It is this which condemns our dearest desires, and makes us trample them under foot to reach to the footstool of majestic virtue. It is this to which we must cleave with our utmost tenacity, and an ever-exercised strength, if we would not slip into ignorance, superstition, and error. Conscience is but its servant and "ready sentinel." It enforces what has been commanded, and reads the decree of reward and punishment. Bethesda was trying to make it do its supreme lord's work, and, of course, she signally failed.

René d'Isten had, if possible, still less apprehension of this high king, except as a recognised authority corroborated his decisions. He had been educated in the Roman Catholic Church, which is the destroyer of personal intercourse between reason and humanity, and the dictator of uncomprehending obedience. René d'Isten's nature was, moreover, peculiarly obedient. Wherever he gave confidence he gave obedience—to the Church, to France, to his father, and now to Bethesda.

She was learning rapidly that what she said he did, what she suggested he executed, what she affirmed he believed. It was a terrible responsibility. Her conscience, weakened by a tacit disobedience, and without any strength of reason behind it, faltered more and more often under the double burden. But this was only in the hours when she was solitary and despondent. Her conscience was strong enough to execute what her reason

knew to be right one step ahead ; but she wished to see the whole road, and where it led, before she went against the rock that seemed to bar her path—the rock of an entire relinquishment of René and the consequences of such a step to him.

When she was with him, however, they mutually felt the support of good intentions, and the self-control they constantly practised. The difference between them lay in this : when René was away from Bethesda he was planning how he could advance and not have it seem wrong to her ; when she was away from him she was trying to brace herself to the effort of receding step by step, so that René should not “feel hurt.”

Her forces were divided ; his, firm to one purpose. Need it be said that he always won ?

One of his last steps was this :

They were talking about the correspondence. The steamer tickets had been bought that day, and it made the time of separation seem very near. René was planning, in his usual orderly way, how often, and on what days, he would write.

“I shall be exactly regular,” he said. “Twice a week I shall send you letters. If they do not arrive, you may know the steamer is late.”

“What a devoted correspondent I shall have !” exclaimed Mabel. “I must admit, I am glad the necessity of answering will not lie all on me.”

René made some light reproach, but immediately relapsed into his former preoccupation. Without a word having been said between him and Bethesda on the subject in his mind, he knew they were thoroughly of accord. Her *petite mine melancholique*, which always fascinated René, was deepened this evening into actual sadness ; for there hung over her the shadow of a speedy departure from Europe, and, more than all Europe, as she dimly realised, from her mind’s companion.

There was a little silence, then Mabel exclaimed :

“Well, what is it, René ? You look as if you were pondering about a conspiracy.”

“Not a conspiracy,” was the quick reply, “for you are in it ; and you, we well know, would never be in a conspiracy. But, if you will allow me, Madame Mabelle, I will tell you what I was thinking.”

“Out with it !” she cried. “Of course you want some-

thing. I know your clever ways, and your cajoling 'Madame Mabelle!'"

She imitated him quite successfully, and there was some merry laughter before René resumed :

"I was quering whether it would not be better for me to address you one letter, and mademoiselle the second. It might be better understood."

He waited to see the effect of this hint on a delicate subject before proceeding further. This matter, and one other, were the only remaining points to be gained ; then the affair would be between him and Esda, and therefore absolutely safe. He watched Mrs. Trescott with a veiled intentness, remarking with satisfaction that Bethesda had assumed the same attitude.

Mabel, however skilfully the question had been insinuated, felt its importance ; but her energetic opposition was sapped by that last sentence. What, indeed, would they think at home ? Her impetuous refusal was checked on her very lips.

She glanced somewhat helplessly from one to the other of her companions. Beth could not resist this appeal. At the very moment that Mabel faltered : "I don't know—I don't like it—but——" Beth exclaimed :

"The letters are to be half for me in any case, auntie, and if it is to make questions, I would much prefer being open and frank about it. You would too, auntie. You always say so."

"Yes, but then——" She stopped again, her usual ready flow of speech checked by this misery of public opinion.

"You are, of course, to do entirely as you judge best, madame," said René gently. "It rests with you to decide. But I should think if you both received letters——" He paused judiciously.

"Well, well !" exclaimed Mabel in some impatience. "Do as you choose. After all. that is the frank way, and I hate nothing so much as concealment."

René, having gained his point, now exerted himself to lead conversation and thoughts away from it, and it was not until the next evening that his final attack began.

It was introduced by Mrs. Trescott herself.

"I have been thinking, René," she said, at a time when Bethesda was busied at the other side of the room, "about the correspondence between you and Beth. It is right enough that she should receive her letters openly. It would be wrong for

her to receive them at all if that were not the case ; but of course the letters are all to be seen by me."

"That is for your niece to say, madame ; not me. I would not dream of dictating her actions in however slight a matter."

"Beth, come here !" called Mrs. Trescott rather sharply. "I must have this affair well understood. In your correspondence with René I shall expect to see all the letters. I cannot permit it otherwise. You understand ?"

The tone was aggressive and harsh. Bethesda would always have fired at it, now she sprang into defiance.

"I have always been in the habit of showing you my letters, Aunt Mabel, but it has been entirely at my own option, and I decline to allow it now to be compelled."

"Then I refuse to let you two correspond !"

René took up a book from the table, and, as he did so, just perceptibly brushed Bethesda's hand. The touch recalled her lessons in tact and self-control. She steadied herself, both physically and mentally ; she stepped back to an inward support before she lifted her eyes to her aunt's face, and said calmly :

"Why, Aunt Mabel ?"

"Because this is a dangerous affair," burst out Mabel ; "because your only safeguard, to either and both of you, is to have no secrecy ; because gunpowder is most dangerous when it is confined, and the only way for you to be saved from imminent peril is to have everything open ; otherwise you will be compromised, otherwise——"

Bethesda laid her hand closely over Mabel's nervous fingers, and said in a voice of concentrated dignity :

"Pray, don't speak so. I never refused to let you see my letters ; I only refused to be coerced. There is no call for me to change a lifelong habit now."

"Then it is understood that there will be no letters pass between you which I shall not read ?"

Mabel looked with still fiery eyes from one to the other, as they stood side by side. René waited for Bethesda to speak, and she replied in a firm voice :

"Understood as it always has been ; no more."

"Madame," said René, leaning forward, "I am sure you understand that no letter I would write to Bethesda could she object to have you see ; but pray remember, dear madame, that

our compact is singular ; and that between two writers, between Béthesda and Béthesda, there might be much written which you would not care to see."

"It isn't the caring I think about," exclaimed Mabel, speaking no longer sharply ; "you know I don't speak from that motive. It is only my desire to save you two from the *greatest danger*." She underlined these words with the full weight of her emphatic voice. "The very fact of knowing your letters are to be seen by a third person will probably avert it. You need to take every precaution, I tell you. The risks of your position cannot be exaggerated."

"You are quite right, no doubt, madame," said René gravely. "It might be a dangerous position for many. For us, with you to advise, its danger can be easily avoided."

Bethesda moved a little away. He felt that his secure words reassured her, even to herself.

"See," he continued, "we will do this, will we not, Béthesda? Madame Mabelle shall rest assured that, when you return to America, she shall see all the letters I send you ; and she shall agree—yes, madame ?—that our Béthesda pages shall be ours alone, even as they are here."

"Until they are published," added Beth innocently.

To this Mabel finally consented.

"I don't feel as if I ought," she said, "but I trust you two so completely, that you can do anything with me. I never did have a firm nature. I could always be coaxed out of anything not really wrong."

The next morning, however, Mabel went to Beth's room early, with a very sober countenance.

"Beth," she said, plunging *in medias res*, "I have been thinking nearly all night, and I want you to go to London."

Bethesda was about to exclaim, but restrained herself. Mabel went on :

"You see, matters between you and René are maturing fast. It is some time yet before we sail. I can't see where this will end, and neither can you. If you go away now, nothing further can happen. Evra will be delighted beyond measure to see you ; I will stay here and finish our shopping, and you will relieve me of great anxiety."

"What has made you so suddenly wish this, Aunt Mabel?" asked Bethesda, in a reticent tone.

"Because every hour makes me more anxious. I am afraid you two are walking into what you don't know. I am sure he already loves you, Beth, and you may, if you stay, love him."

Bethesda did not start nor speak, but her face faded slowly to a bloodless gray.

"I am afraid, my dear, dear little girl, I am afraid that you are sowing seeds of misery for your whole life. How can I ever forgive myself if your young and lovely and promising life should be blasted in its bud, and through my agency? It is a terrible risk to run; terrible for me as well as you, darling. Do go away while the harm is yet undone."

"You think he loves me," said Bethesda, in an intensely suppressed tone. "Why do you?"

"Everything shows it, dear; all his actions, all his words, all his looks. I don't think it will harm him, or be anything but happiness to him. He has nothing to lose, and everything to gain. But you, dearie, you have all to lose, and nothing to gain. It would break my heart if you should be unhappy."

"I shall not be; don't fear for me, auntie. But do you suppose you are surely right? Do you think he recognises it himself?"

"He may, and he may not; I can't say. Oh, if he were only unmarried, how happy I should be to do everything to favour this! You are made for one another; it would have been a perfect——"

"Hush, auntie, please," said Bethesda, in a tone of unendurable pain.

"Now, perhaps it will be hard for you to marry, my darling."

Bethesda tried to recover herself.

"I probably never would have married," she said.

She moved away the length of the room, and then turned with a sudden flash in her eyes:

"Aunt Mabel, I can't believe in this supposition of yours! You have mistaken him, as you have me."

"I *know* he loves you, Beth, and you *may* love him. Do go to London, dear."

"There is no necessity for it, at least not with me. I still think you may be mistaken in him as well."

"If he should swear he did not love you, I would know

better! I have not lived as long as I have for nothing. But his loving you I don't mind. He is honourable, and worthy of the confidence I place in him. It undoubtedly makes him happier; he shows it in every fibre of body and mind. But you, darling, are growing thin and tired-looking. Your sympathies are too strongly excited, and this emotional atmosphere is bad for you. It will be a rest to you to go away."

"To Evra? She would kill me!" cried Beth involuntarily. "Besides, there isn't any need, auntie. If you are only afraid for me, and think the joy will outweigh the pain for him, why, I will certainly stay. I can assure you there is no need of doing otherwise on my account."

"It would relieve me immensely if you would go away."

"You need not be anxious about me; but, to make you quite easy, I will say this: If I feel the necessity of going to London, I will do so without your asking me."

"That is a promise. Well, that does relieve me, for I know you are only anxious to do right; and I am glad for you to have all the pleasure you can, and not take pain with it."

Mrs. Trescott left her then, but all day, through dressmakers' chatter and clerks' prices and praises, the conflicting thoughts Mabel had brought uppermost in her mind haunted Bethesda like double and confusing shadows. What one would say, the other would contradict; what one would insist upon as the absolute necessity, the other would assert to be needless and silly.

She looked forward to the luncheon-table to decide the question. Then she would see him, and each minute action should be scrutinised. If he loved her, she ought to go away. Ought she? Why not leave it to him, since it was his happiness or unhappiness which was concerned? To herself, she did not lend a thought. Even when her aunt had pressed it home she had hardly thought of herself. That it would, of course, be happier for her to stay she never doubted. The only question was: Would it be right to him?

Before entering the luncheon room she stopped to lay aside her things, and caught sight of her face in the glass. Its pallor and fatigue startled her; there were great rings around her eyes, which seemed burning in their sockets. The fanciful notion came to her that they were like inverted torches, with ashes thick about them.

She smiled at the fantastic idea, rubbed her cheeks hard to rouse a little colour, and joined her aunt.

M. d'Isten was not there. She remembered, now, that he had mentioned having an engagement at this time with one of the ministers. She felt cold, and lonely, and dispirited. The prolonged suspense seemed more than she could bear. If she could have been set down in London that minute she believed she would, just from weariness. But it was impossible for her to decide if it were necessary for her to leave; and, if not necessary, why bring the pain sooner than must be?

She went upstairs and found on the table a cluster of moss roses, the stems held together by a ring René had taken to have made smaller for her. It was the one he had selected, and which her aunt had given her on her last birthday.

The glowing ruby clasping the words, "Let not grass grow on the path of friendship," seemed a direct answer to her doubts. It made her glad and light-hearted, and, putting it on her finger, she closed her hand softly over it, and so holding it on the sofa a while later, she fell asleep.

Just before she awoke a dream came to her, short and vivid.

She went down, she dreamed, with a wrecked ship in mid-ocean, but rising, caught the side of a raft, and was in comparative safety. Then the raft began to crumble; the waves broke over her more and more. Suddenly a woman was tossed near, and tried to catch the spar, too small, Bethesda knew, to save more than one. At first she did not aid the woman, but allowed her to have the same chance she herself had had; then, with a nobler impulse, stretched out her hand to assist her. The drowning creature grasped it convulsively, and, in a moment, shared her frail support.

But where had she seen that face? It fascinated her; she forgot everything in trying to solve the mystery. The woman meantime, realising the raft could not save them both, and seeing Bethesda absorbed, gave her a sudden shove into the foaming waves. And Bethesda, her mind now keenly clear, exclaimed: Louise!

She sank down, down into the green water, and the woman's face, bent over the edge of the raft, followed her with wide-distended eyes. "He will hate me, hate me!" she cried despairingly; and Bethesda, still sinking, awoke.

CHAPTER XV.

“ Love in thy heart like living waters rose,
Thine own self lost in the abounding flood ;
So that with thee, joy, comfort, thy life's good,
Thy youth's delight, thy beauty's freshest rose,
Were trash, thy unregretful bounty chose
Before loved feet, for softness, to be strewed.”

W. C. ROSCOE.

THE evening came and passed ; the dreaded meeting was over, and her worries had slipped from her, leaving her light and glad. Why worry about him ? she asked herself. Women take so much upon themselves ; they feel the weight of the universe, of every man who likes them, upon their shoulders ! “ They never seem to remember,” she exclaimed half aloud, her head defiantly poised, “ that men are also reasonable beings, quite able to take care of themselves,—probably much better than we could take care of them at our best. Leave each his independence of action, men as well as women ; let them decide what is right for them, without question from us, and we the same. If we carry our own trials worthily it is as much as we are able to do—often more !”

She worried all night, however, in spite of her defiant words, and at last resolved upon speaking to René herself frankly, and asking him to be strong with her in combating any equivocal tendencies they might feel growing upon them. So she wrote him a note, asking him to come to the parlour a moment. He answered immediately in person, looking very grave, but with the greatest consideration in his manner.

Mrs. Trescott had already gone out, and it was the first time the two had met alone. He was well aware that it could only be because of something Bethesda considered gravely important that she would have asked him to come to her.

As he entered he took in the situation at once. She was dressed for the street, and her hat lay upon the table. He saw that she was similarly prepared to leave him, unless he could set her anxieties at rest.

She was standing, and thanked him for coming so quickly in a low, steady voice, which made him seat himself in the chair to which she motioned him, ready to face the worst.

There was a little pause, during which her hands clasped one another closely, but in a moment she lifted her eyes and met his bravely.

"I asked you to come here," she said, "because I feel that we have not been doing quite right of late. I trust to you to understand me. I wished to ask you to help me in never doing anything which you could not repeat to your wife without embarrassment."

She stopped, and her breath came somewhat fast, but he did not keep her in suspense.

"You know that whatever you wish is a command for me," he said earnestly. "I shall do as you desire to the utmost of my power."

"Thanks," she said, with a glance from clear eyes which already repaid him for any sacrifice. "I was sure you would. Auntie wished me to go to London, but I thought we could stay together the short time that remained."

"Yes," he replied, not looking up now; "we will be strong. It must be. We cannot help that; we must only strive to be strong."

She did not understand all his meaning, but she knew that her heart was crying out: Noble, noble René! She had more confidence in him than in herself. He was strong, and had the habit of many self-controlled years upon him. But when she saw him sad, his only opportunity for *abandon* cut off—what should she do then?

Her eyes flashed to his face. It impressed her profoundly. "I will follow his example!" she cried to herself; "I will be brave, and pure, as he is."

"Monsieur," she said suddenly. "Will you tell your wife openly of our compact and our friendship? She should know it all."

He hesitated just an instant; then he said gravely:

"Since you think it best, I will."

"Ah, that takes a weight from one's heart!" she cried.

She held out her hand to him with a frank gesture of gratitude, rising as she did so.

He also rose, and took her palm in his.

"Do not fear, Béthesda," he said; "we will be strong."

He turned, bowed profoundly, and left her; and she walked away to the window, her hands pressed to her heart, which

was in strange confusion, while her soul was relieved and thankful.

Would she aid his wife, now, to ascend the breaking raft? Yes; she believed she would. She could only try to make herself worthy of him by all unselfish actions.

The following day was Sunday, and an atmosphere of peace seemed to brood over Bethesda, strangely sweet after the turmoil of the last days. She knew, too, whence it came. The effort in the right direction brought its own reward. A feeling of righteousness strengthened her to the fulfilment of her resolve; and her intercourse with René, chastened yet constant, retained all its delight, without the sting of possible wrong.

She won the others to her own feelings also. Mrs. Trescott, to whom the interview and its results had been fully confided, felt almost as much relieved as Bethesda. She thought the earnest resolve of two such natures could not be without good effect. And René, strongly influenced by Bethesda's dignified, yet touching appeal, did as she had bidden him, and at least followed where she led.

So to-day, spirit really seemed to be overcoming the laws of nature, and the boon of peace descended upon them.

The hours winged their way slowly by, fragrant as the June breeze; still as a floating bird. In the morning they went across the river to church, and, in the midst of holy pictures, with the Gothic arches clasping hands in prayer above them, they listened to High Mass. The intervals were mellowed by organs answering one another in rich harmony, that broadened and uplifted their thoughts; and, near by, the cooing of a happy child was the sweetest of all the sounds.

Towards the end of the service the baby stretched out its arms to Bethesda, and demanded imperiously to go to her. She was not loath, and, once in her arms, the child became instantly quieted by looking at her. She seemed to appeal to the little one's affection, too, for presently it put a chubby hand softly on her cheek. Bethesda caught the fingers to her lips and pressed the tiny body close with a thrill of irrepressible feeling. Involuntarily she glanced at René; he was watching her with curious and pitying eyes. He knew, and she knew—then—that she would never hold thus a child of her own.

As they came out she turned from the church reluctantly.

"I never passed a happier hour," she said, "and it is our last church going."

The next week they had planned to go to Versailles, and the next—to think of it!—they would have left Paris.

But this tranquillity was only the trembling stillness of a spring when full to the brim, just ready to overflow, either to sink into the ground or to go streaming down the hills. The next day little signs and words were like the first trickling drops; the day after Bethesda was in the same perplexity, the same half blind struggle for light and knowledge.

The same, and yet not the same; for the appeal she had made and which had been answered, she was sure, in the same earnestness of spirit that she had asked it, made her lean with fuller reliance on the strength she had proved in René. She knew herself strong enough to go away, to do anything she could positively see to be right; and she never doubted but that he was conscious of the same power of self-sacrifice to duty. How could she doubt him when every event of his life had evidenced his rectitude and nobility? So at last she concluded to ask him to tell her what to do. He could see, probably, further than she; he knew himself even better, and whatever he said would surely be right.

She wrote a short note asking him if she should go to London, and gave it to him when they met. She did not mean to be underhand, but it would be easier for her to wait until she knew his decision before she told her aunt. If he said go, it would of course be instantly known; if he said stay, it would be the same as if she had not written, and the subject was one on which she was glad to avoid unnecessary agitation.

The evening passed with no disturbing elements. René could not read the note until he had bidden them good-night, but he was conscious of its presence, and suspected what it contained. There was a perturbation in the girl's manner, an almost pleading look in her eyes, which he interpreted aright. But he was exceedingly careful not to frighten her. An incessantly controlled tenderness, a surety of himself, quieted her on whichever side of her question she looked. Her confidence grew as the evening proceeded. He would not send her away; of course not; it was foolish in her to think of it.

But, once in her room alone, with the charm of his presence

gone, and the heavens looking at her in their calm scrutiny, she was no longer so sure.

She could not say then, or at any future time, why it was that whenever she left René and entered her own room her first impulse was to throw herself on to her knees. There she would remain for hours. A few times dawn surprised her still kneeling, still dressed. Once or twice she slept, her head pillowed on her folded arms.

But to-night the eagerness to know, or at least to surmise, what René would say, drove her up and down the room with noiseless steps. She almost regretted having left him the decision, and yet she had never relied upon him but he had proved himself strong. So, after every wavering, she came back to the thought that she could trust him. He would not send her away.

The night passed, as it did now more and more frequently, in a slumber so light that not a breath was drawn unconsciously. She awoke late, and there, under the door, was a letter. Her breath fluttered on her lips. She could not reach out her hand to touch this missive of fate. Must she go? Or would he let her stay?

Finally suspense became unbearable; any knowledge was better. She tore it open and read.

It was not long, but it worked a transfiguration in Bethesda's nature.

He had seized upon the unrecognised truth which had dictated her note, and showed it in full stature to herself. What she had not dreamed existed, he had exultingly seen. She was his now, unmistakably. He knew it, if she did not; and the sure taking possession which fascinated her never hesitated.

"I hold thy two hands in mine," he wrote, "and bid thee stay. I rejoice that when an angel troubled the waters of thy virgin heart I, unlike the afflicted man who waited for years beside the pool in far-off Galilee, am able to step first into the sacred waters, and come forth restored and glad. Ah, now my name has a new significance! I am truly reborn, through the miracle of thy maiden nature stirred for me alone.

"Fear not, Béthesda, and be not sad. We shall be always together. The breadth of the earth, and the oceans, of heaven itself, cannot divide us now."

Why, indeed, should she go away? Not distance, or time, or

eternity could alter this truth. She loved him! The whole world might marvel; they stood side by side, above the world, above circumstances, above man, and the devil. They were supreme, and united by the divine law of Love.

And she?—Why, the sunshine danced, and the wind was full of thrilling melody, and every atom was quivering with joy like the air on a heated hill-top. There was no more perplexity, nor trouble, nor sorrow. The golden age had come. All the leaves were of pure silver, and the flowers priceless gems; the very dust was precious, and the rain a diamond shower. How glad the world was! there was no unhappiness anywhere; and what supreme happiness was hers! And oh, poor auntie, who had lost, perhaps, even such delight! What would she, Bethesda, do if she should lose it? But she would not, she could not. All the peculiar circumstances that had brought her and René together could not occur twice, and his existence was now complete; he himself had said it! All else would be superfluous. And for herself? Well, he trusted her, and he knew her marvellously well. She made no vows, but she thought he was not mistaken. They would trust one another.

CHAPTER XVI.

“What the law of nature is in regard to matter the moral law is to man.”

“Above all right and duty is love, leading lover and beloved to the pure unfolding of their natures. . Woe to those who desecrate its divine mission.”—AUERBACH.

PERIODS of happiness are, they say, blank pages in history. Who indeed can describe the processes of growth, the blossoming of a plant, the details of a sunrise? Infinitesimal atoms meet and coalesce and vibrate and increase, and after a long period we perceive a colour. The vibrations quicken and intensify, and another hue becomes sensible to us. But who can trace the changing? who can see the subtle causes and the still subtler effects? Finally, when white light is achieved, what is it but dazzling radiance before which our eyes fall, blurred, blinded, well-nigh destroyed through excess of sight?

René d'Isten was almost as much astounded as Bethesda at the effulgent joy which now broke upon them. He had of late

known it must come, and had anticipated it with a calmness which left him all unprepared for the onslaught of rapture which assailed him. It was fiercely encroaching ; it almost frightened him, and yet it was with a delicious fear. He was loved at last ; loved by the fairest woman he had ever seen ; loved by a noble character and a fine intellect. He was, yes, surely, he was content.

Bethesda was more ; she was radiantly and gloriously happy. She asked nothing of life ; existence had blossomed into its rarest flower and placed it in her hand. She was awed by its beauty ; she was well-nigh overpowered by its fragrance. Each moment throbbed with a million hearts, which yet seemed incapable of containing her bliss. Her mind could not conceive its extent ; her being could not contain it. Over the whole world it spread, making her charitable, pitiful, tender to both joy and sorrow. Love could not come to her nature without thrilling its finest fibres. She began to understand what God's love must be like, which enwraps the universe in its warm folds.

Transcendently happy as she was, it made her only more commiserating to the trials of those not blessed as she was. Her aunt, Evra, Louise, were all bathed in a flood of sympathy for their deprivations. She could not be quite content unless her happiness was made to serve others, and she floated down from the heights of her ecstasy to do some trifling service for Mrs. Trescott with a bounteous grace never seen in her before.

Of course Mrs. Trescott noticed the change, for Beth grew more beautiful and stronger hour by hour. She never looked tired now ; her steps seemed winged in their elastic freedom ; her form had lovelier curves, her flesh a softer lustre. Her eyes, thought René, were a shining iridescence of light over unknown and half-revealed depths ; her mouth was embodied tenderness.

Mabel asked her one day what had happened to make her so light-hearted ; were all her anxieties gone ?

"Yes," Bethesda affirmed with absolute sincerity, "there is nothing more to fear. It is all settled and sure, and oh ! so restful ! I did not know it had been wearing on me until now the weight is gone."

"How did it go, dear ?"

"All of itself, auntie," said Beth lightly. "I don't know quite how. I only know it is all clear now,—and do rejoice with me ! I am so, so happy !"

And Mabel did rejoice with her. It lifted much weight from Mrs. Trescott's objections to see her niece so radiant and well. She knew that René loved Bethesda, and strongly suspected that the love was reciprocated, although not acknowledged even to the girl's own heart; and, desiring to give them as much pleasure as they could have, allowed them to be together a large portion of the time. They were happy now, she argued, and if the cost were large, it was too late not to pay it, and there was all the more reason why they should take its full value while they might.

René, knowing all, could not comprehend Mrs. Trescott's actions. He was aware that Bethesda had not told her aunt of the two notes, for he had gently insinuated the prudence of letting matters rest, and Bethesda was only too ready to do so. It was hardly ten days now before they left, and she had no doubt, no acknowledged doubt, but that her aunt, after a due amount of persuasion, would consent to this, as she had to all the rest. Her aunt could see all if she chose; neither of them tried to conceal their spontaneous actions; and since Mrs. Trescott did not speak, she probably did not positively either approve or disapprove.

Often and oftener now midnight found the three still together, and when one night, in some veiled surprise, Beth referred to their changed habits, Mabel said:

"It is not often that such pleasant hours come in life, and I believe in taking the fulness of enjoyment from them while they last. I don't care to sit up late just for the idea of it, but when there is anything that makes it worth while, no one is readier than I am to let time slip by unnoticed."

"You are a dear auntie!"

"Am I? Well, we are enjoying ourselves now, and on the steamer we can make up lost sleep—when René is no more with us."

"And what will I be doing then?" asked René, a trifle reproachfully.

"Oh, you'll have the peace to make with all your friends," said Mrs. Trescott. "How many of them have you neglected? you, who used always to leave us at ten to attend to social duties! Do you remember that evening when you were going to some state affair and came in here just to show yourself in all your orders, and then never went after all? Tell me you won't have plenty to do in conciliating everybody!"

"I will succeed," he answered confidently. "My friends now think I am writing a book. They ask me each day how it progresses. I tell them: Well, very well."

He smiled at Bethesda, and there was a merry peal of laughter.

"When you go away I shall have finished my first volume. Some will be eager to see it, but I shall make them wait until it is published. You see I shall be quite frank."

"I wish you would be frank about everything," said Mabel, a little soberly.

"And are we not, madame? Our companionship is as open as the daylight. We need not intrude details on all the world, but if they look they can see."

"Yes; I suppose that is true. As long as our consciences are clear we need not inquire the opinions of others. If there is one thing I detest it is pandering to public opinion! Life early took that weakness out of me."

"I don't know," said Bethesda, a trifle wistfully. "I like the good opinion of every one. We were said in Florence, René, to be the only foreign women about whom there was no gossip. That gratified me exceedingly, I confess."

René glanced at her with just a tinge of possible remorse. But the present was her own choice, and every moment bore witness to her happiness in it.

Often now René brought some manuscript for Bethesda to criticise to the parlour in the mornings, and as Mrs. Trescott was generally home, occupied with milliners and dressmakers, but still affording chaperonage, he was gladly invited in. Then they would take refuge in the deep embrasure of the window, near which was the desk, and spend many happy hours oblivious of the chatter and bargaining going on without their charmed retreat.

Sometimes, in the interims, when the room would be for a few moments empty, René would press his lips to Bethesda's firm hand, now lying relaxed on the desk. Once his moustache brushed her hair as he looked over a paper she held, and it made her curiously faint. A few days before they left, in picking up a fallen book, the lithe man kissed her foot.

She started back at that, and looked at him with large eyes. His face was glowing. He stood very close to her and whispered:

"I thought I never should abase myself to kiss a woman's foot, but I am proud to kiss yours."

She moved away, not with coyness, nor indignation, but a feeling of solemn responsibility seizing her heart. Here was her woman's work, here duty was clear and imperative. She must leave him while he was in this state; but he must understand it was not anger, only rebuke. She turned when she reached her door and gave him a glance.

He darted after her as a needle to its magnet; but she was too quick for him. With a leap of the heart which nearly stunned her she was in her room, and the door was close shut.

Then she fell on her knees and, for a moment, lost consciousness. The gnawing pain in her heart roused her. She did not mind it; it was sweet to her. Was she not bearing it for him?

"Any other pleasures are not worth love's pains;" and this is true even of corporeal pains. The terror Bethesda had always had of the disease which had killed her mother faded away in the desire to prove herself, by fire and sword, worthy of her love.

Here was now a palpable test. She who had been blind to nature before suddenly awakened to its terrible force. In her hands lay the controlling and guiding power of her own and another's soul. She must, indeed, now, be his conscience; and to be this she must follow her own. Their love, their life, their rectitude, depended upon her. The awful responsibility came near crushing her as she contemplated it and felt her weakness, felt the omnipotence this other will held over hers, and that, in its despite, she must save them both.

While she was dressing for dinner, a couple of hours afterwards, a white missive came under her door. Not a step was to be heard, but there it lay, and presently she stooped to lift it.

He had probably realised the delicacy of their position, and had written some apology.

She opened and read it, and the announcement of dinner came while she still stared at the glowing epistle. The words should have been traced in flame to express either the feelings of writer or receiver. For it was not an apology in the least. It was a revelling in imaginative visions, which wounded Bethesda to the quick.

"Perhaps I should have gone to London," she murmured,

as she held the letter to the candle flame. "Perhaps I have hurt him, been a temptress to him, my noble, pure René!"

There was something of the mother's regret in her tone, of the mother's forgiving solicitude. She would save him from himself.

A swift knock came at the parlour door. René had called for them to go down to dinner. She waited until she heard her aunt come out, and then joined them, keeping close beside Mrs. Trescott.

René instantly saw she was grieved, and took the hint she had given. He devoted himself to Madame Mabelle the whole evening. He directed all his conversation to her, not neglecting Bethesda, nor altering his manner enough for her aunt to notice it; and contriving, in an inimitable manner, to surround Bethesda with a sense of entire submission to her will.

What with this quick yielding, and discriminating devotion, her heart relented. She thought she had misjudged him. That she should be in fault here! It was too cruelly mortifying; she would never forgive herself.

So when they separated, a little earlier than common, he understood that his peace was made.

A couple of hours later M. d'Isten came down the stairs lightly. He could not sleep; indeed, he had not tried, but since leaving the ladies had sat at his window watching the movement of the river silvered by the moon.

What had been his thoughts during that long reverie? Not he himself could say. His mind was usually clear and precise even in silence; but to-night it was different. He was letting his memory slip back and his imagination sweep forwards without any attempt to control either. He was in that dangerous state termed drifting.

Whither had the imperceptible waves carried him that he should now descend to the lower hall, and cast on the dim outline of familiar surroundings an eager as well as pensive glance? Had the quiet quadrangle, with its closed doors and blank walls, taken the place of those inexorable banks which imprisoned the creeping waves? Or was he simply indulging a fancy for pacing up and down a larger space than his room afforded on this dreamy summer night?

He had made several slow turns, and was lingering in the window to breathe the cool night air, when his attention was

called into sudden action by a sound in the room near which he stood. The door noiselessly opened, and, hiding himself behind the heavy curtains, he could see a slight figure in trailing white draperies go quickly along the hall to the parlour where he had passed so many delicious hours.

The door yielded to her hand, and she went in, leaving it ajar. From René's position he could see her cross the room and go to the desk where they so often consulted together. Paper after paper she took out and glanced over by the brilliant moonlight. The attitudes she assumed, clearly cut against the soft radiance, were exquisite. Once or twice, with the little impatient gesture that was delightfully familiar to him, she tossed the mantle of her hair aside, and in falling its duskiness caught golden gleams that made it seem alive. Once in the midst of her search she stood quite still. He knew she was troubled. Was she thinking of him? grieving over something he had said or done, or something he had failed to say or do?

Finally she shut the desk with the same caution that had guarded all her movements. Was she going back to her chamber now, to sleep, to dream?

The perturbed watcher took a step forward in the comparative darkness caused by the closing of the door, but instantly shrank back. She had hesitated a moment, and was now coming to the very place where he stood.

He drew the draperies closer about him. The sound of her garments on the wooden floor was the only one to be heard. The hum of the city sank into abeyance; the wind was suddenly still.

The man had a remarkable capacity for blotting himself out, of which he now made use to the uttermost, and the voluminous window-hangings aided him so successfully that there was not a thought in Bethesda's mind of any one being nearer than her aunt as she stepped into the embrasure.

The moon shone here also, and he could see, in illuminated distinctness, the soft pallor of her face and the tremulous curves of her mouth. She was thinking of him, surely; she was grieving with virgin sorrow over their inevitable separation; listening, in the silence of night, to the moan nature made deep beneath the brave spirit which accepted a maimed lot as unrivalled happiness.

Lovely, beloved Esda! her lot was joined to his, to his

unhappy destiny. Perhaps for the first time he let a feeling of bitterness towards Louise rise unchecked. That her weakness and petty ambition should have ruined the perfect union these two might have made!

But that was all past—an irrevocable past,—and he was going to be “unlike other men.”

“*Ma chère, belle France!*” murmured Bethesda.

She had been standing quite still, her eyes wandering from the sky and trees to those smooth links which had fascinated René a while ago. Now he was fascinated in another way. At her low exclamation his heart beat tumultuously; he feared she would hear its quick throb. Would her sensitive ear allow him to escape undiscovered? He hardly dared to breathe.

But she was absorbed in her own dreams. She did not hear the hurried heart-beats so near her own; she did not feel the short breaths that almost touched her cheek; but, peculiarly open to sympathetic influences as she was, she did feel the magnetism of his presence. She moved a trifle, and leaned against the casement within a few inches of his breast. Her face was turned away; she was so close that he could not see her figure, but only looked down upon her soft hair and brow.

He dared not look! One slight movement would enfold her in his arms, and not reluctantly, perhaps! That unconscious yielding to his presence!—it was maddening!

A long shudder passed over him, and his eyes closed.

The woman started upright. Had she heard anything, felt anything? He did not know; he could not care.

He did not see her scan the enclosure with a swift glance, nor witness the trembling of an uncomprehended fear, but he heard an uneasy half laugh, half sigh, as she moved quickly away.

When he again opened his eyes everything was dim. A cloud had come over the moon, and the darkness was empty and chill.

He had to feel his way upstairs. He did not once look behind him. Perhaps he, too, was afraid of ghosts.

CHAPTER XVII.

"Love is found to consist in the marriage of true minds, in a mutual surrender, in a mental correspondence, on which, in spite of time and death, constancy stamps the seal of immortality, and completeness impresses the semblance of infinitude."—SIMPSON'S *Phil. of Shakespeare's Sonnets*.

"There may be men who take every moral height at a dash ; but to the most of us there must come moments when our wills can but just rise and walk in their sleep."—GEO. W. CABLE.

THE next morning when M. d'Isten entered the parlour, he saw in an instant that Bethesda, sitting in the bay window, was, if not angry, subdued. He immediately crossed over to her and held out his hand.

"Bon jour, Béthesda," he said, with a persuasive smile.

She did not refuse him her hand, but as the cold fingers lay in his she said low :

"I must speak with you."

He was alarmed by her manner, and with his usual skill had in a few moments arranged an excuse for a *tête-à-tête*.

"Behold me at your orders," he said then gravely, standing before her. She motioned him to a chair, and in a low voice began abruptly :

"Your letter yesterday made me sad, René. Even in imagination we must not go too far. Thought is free, you say ; yes, it is free, and therefore it should be so guided as to bring us the truest happiness. I am afraid we are both falling away from our first conception of this compact : A uniting of minds whose only aim was literary development."

"That was all," he said in a tone between a question and a reproach, while he watched her keenly. Would she fail him ?

"You said," she continued, with downcast eyes, "that I helped you to recognise your trials for what they were, 'the work of God.' There is nothing you could say to give me more happiness than this. I wish always to be an aid, never a burden either in thought or action ; but this cannot be unless we remember the circumstances in which we are placed and live accordingly ; otherwise we must separate now."

"Béthesda !" exclaimed René, in a low tone of pain.

"I am not angry," said Bethesda hastily. "Do not fancy that for a moment. I am only sad because it hurts me to give you pain, and yet I cannot do otherwise. I tried to think last evening I could let it slip by without saying anything, but it did not seem right. I wish you always for my friend, René; we are in a most difficult position; we must look closely where we step, and when your poetic fancy dazzles you with its impossible possibilities I must be clear-sighted, and turn you from the dangerous path."

Perhaps the effect of such words as these, with their endeavour to recall cooler relations by calling passion "poetic," and fervour "fancy"—by letting fall the snow of prudence on the fires of tumultuous feeling—can be somewhat imagined, coming to René after an apparition such as that of the night before, and the suppositions he had had of the fair ghost's musings now so coldly belied.

He felt thwarted and hurt. If his emotions had not obscured his usual insight he might easily have seen the subdued yearning which underlay every sentence of the seemingly chill words; but no amount of insight could have taught him now so well as the imperious instinct he followed.

He bent before her without a word, lifted her hands to his trembling lips, and with swift steps left the enclosure and the apartment.

He remained in his room the whole morning, feeling keenly the poignancy of his position; feeling thrown back upon himself as nothing had ever made him feel before. It was not her fault nor his, he told himself; there was nothing to conquer or evade. She was right; their cruel position constrained them, and the outstretched wings were clipped and cramped back into the cage.

At noon he let luncheon slip by unnoticed, and later, when he was obliged to go to the *ministère*, he stole downstairs with the utmost caution that Bethesda should not hear his step. He returned, looking haggard. Like Bethesda, mental agitation told quickly on his physique. He went to his room with a springless step, and let himself fall desolately into a chair.

A cynical observer might have said he was taking the luxury of misery, but he would have been unjust. René d'Isten's temperament was essentially poetic,—that is, he felt

through the imagination as well as the emotions. Everything was heightened by this double focus. It was his misfortune in many cases, as it was his delight in others. His tendency was to go to extremes, and only by the necessary education of exact self-government had this quality been subdued. Now, in the relaxation of severe discipline, it had its revenge, and his trouble was not exaggerated but intensely felt.

He went down to dinner before any one else, took a plate of soup, and hurried away. He could not eat, and he did not wish to meet any one. The ladies knew he had an engagement that evening which must be fulfilled. It had been often deplored in advance; now, he was grateful for it. He could not endure to enter their accustomed circle with the necessity of repression upon him.

Yet he longed inexpressibly to see Béthesda. The tears stood in his eyes as he went blindly upstairs. He heard the parlour door open and then their voices. Mabel was wondering where René was, and looking up and down the stairs for him.

No retreat was possible. He stepped into a recess to make way for them, and to be in the shade. As Mabel swept past, thinking he would, of course, follow them, she said reproachfully:

“Why didn’t you wait for us?”

He did not answer, and Bethesda looked up in quick alarm, all the fears of the day crystallised in an instant.

Her searching glance called him forth from silence and shadow. She saw his pallid face with lines of pain heavily drawn upon it, and she stopped at once.

“I have been to dinner,” he said in a husky voice.

“Can I do nothing for you?” she exclaimed from her heart. “What has happened?”

Her yearning eyes were fixed upon him, and the tears sprang to his very eyelids in reply.

“I cannot say,” he murmured; “only, do not grieve.”

Then, with a wild impulse of absolute submission, he took her hand as she stood above him, and, bending low, laid it upon his head.

A second later he sprang past her, and ran upstairs.

Bethesda joined her aunt, her brain in a whirl. Was she the cause of all this suffering; she, who would not hurt him for worlds?

"Where is René?" asked Mrs. Trescott, surprised to see her alone.

Bethesda composed herself to answer, and shield him.

"He has had his dinner. He is going out, you remember, and took it early."

The evening, so rare to be spent alone, was lonely.

"Dear me, how we shall miss René!" sighed Mabel, and Bethesda shuddered.

Before she slept she wrote him wildly, beseeching him not to think her cruel, that she was as much hurt as he; more, since she had to deal the blow. "Be the same as before your last letter; those were happy days. I cling close to my friends; even if unwise, I cling close to you. Don't hold me away!"

She despatched this in the morning by the servant who brought her coffee; and René answered it immediately, a delicate, deferential, yet tender letter, which added much to Bethesda's admiration for him. He was always so ready to admit a mistake, so fearlessly humble; and to think that she should hold the reins of such a nature!

When they met René's old manner was entirely restored. A healthier reaction had set in before he received Bethesda's letter, and that, with its clinging dependence, never fully evidenced before, compensated him for the misunderstanding, which, after all, was not entirely pain.

He knew well that a stream cannot be turned backwards by any slight means; and that a fall, no matter how short, makes the current surer and swifter for a while. How often had Bethesda fondly imagined a few words would restore the waters to their tiny spring, there to be safely contained, and never, oh, never, to overflow again!

René knew better. The spring had made a stream, and the stream a river; the current was strong, the waters many; it must inevitably flow into the sea; indeed, it was already exchanging its onward current for the recurrent tide. What Bethesda mistook for a turning of the flood in an old direction was but the ebb of an everlasting sea; and the ebb was only a gathering of forces for the new flow.

Slowly, imperceptibly to her, yet how fatally swift! the tide crept up. What had been at one time forbidden or deplored was now accepted without a thought; what had

been the cause of gentle rebuke was now an unquestioned pleasure. The shining ripples played about Bethesda's feet, and she delighted in them, standing on the shore of that fatal sea. The spray shone crystal-clear, and threw itself lightly to her lips, her eyes; she brushed it away at first, then enjoyed the fresh free touch, and let it blind her sight.

The waves crept higher, and she threw herself in a delicious rapture on the smooth surface, and let herself drift with them to feel their buoyancy and strength. She did not doubt an instant but that she could touch her feet, and the waves would, in any case, carry her back presently; and she smiled at the receding shore.

It all seemed to her so peaceful and calm that she could not believe it was fraught with the most imminent danger. The mighty power to which she and René were now equally subdued asserted its supremacy over all circumstances, over all adventitious facts. Thought was free; love was free; sympathy of mind and heart could not be chained; it overarched all as the sky does trees, and shrubs, and men.

But deeds could be controlled. Here the clear-sighted resolve of a lifetime strengthened René to obey what he knew was right in Bethesda's prohibitions, and the intuitive cleaving to purity held Bethesda to moral action.

The terrible undertow of passion they did not recognise at the time. It was only an instinctive effort that they made to keep on the surface; and the waters were exquisitely beautiful, and elastic, and strong; and soon, oh, so cruelly soon! they were to take separate paths along the shore, and might never be again together. Let them enjoy it while they could, since life would be dry hereafter.

Their separation was, indeed, now drawing very near, and already darkened their hopes.

"I shall come to America, do not fear," said René, for Bethesda was haunted with a horrible sense of the frailty of their imaginative fabric. "I shall come," he repeated. "Every step I advance in my career will bring me nearer to the day when I shall meet you there. Trust me, Esda; before many years I will be in the *corps diplomatique* of Washington."

Bethesda did not reply. She had often wondered why it was that René looked forward to the coming years with so much less apprehension and intolerable weariness than herself.

After much veiled scrutiny and careful study, however, through a judgment unobscured by pique—for she was of a large enough nature to give gold for silver and never count the cost—she came to the conclusion that it was because he had long looked forward hopelessly, decades stretching before him in sterile monotony, and that now he saw them transfigured by a warm light, and blossoming with all the delectable flowers of sympathy, so that, naturally, the change was only a delight.

With herself, she thought quite simply, it was different.

When she once comprehended this she listened without fear, but feeling a strange sense of incompetence in understanding, to his plans for six, eight, ten, twenty years ahead. Was she going to live all these alone? Her mind refused to grasp the sum of this enormous debt. It was just as well, better indeed, that it did. We can take step after step for a long time, but if we had to leap them all at once,—well, we should probably break our necks.

“Remember, Esda,” said René, after a pause, “remember, thou must never desert me. Promise me that if thou art ill unto death, thou wilt send for me. From the furthest point of the earth I will come to thee.”

“It might not be right. Never let me interfere with duty. But auntie is the one to ask for that.”

“I will, to-night.”

“And if you are ill?”

“Thou shalt know it, and when I die, all our letters and papers will be sent to you. I have arranged it. I can make myself obeyed even in death.”

In spite of these lugubrious conversations the last days were happy ones. René, except in moments on which he refused to let himself dwell, felt his life full. And Bethesda felt that pain slept while he was present. Deep in her consciousness she was aware of something ready to spring upon her like a wild, ravenous beast, but now it was chained, and she turned her back upon it.

Mrs. Trescott was sick at heart in watching her. Without knowing that the girl recognised it, she did know that René d'Isten held her darling's love, and she cried out passionately against the sorrow and suffering such a lot would bring. The girl had changed before her eyes. She was no longer her little niece; she was a deep-souled woman, with wide capacities which

no one knew. Even Mrs. Trescott doubted if she knew her thoroughly now. And extraordinary natures must be extraordinarily treated. A few days, and this dangerous intimacy would cease; a couple of weeks, and the ocean would gradually divide these characters now being welded into one.

With cruel celerity the last day approached. It was the evening before their departure, and at an early hour next morning the train would leave. Mrs. Trescott was in her travelling dress, but Bethesda wore a black dress, long, and plain, with deep lace cuffs and collar, from which her head rose, on its full throat, unusually severe and classical.

She was looking every inch a queen o'er herself, and yet René knew what turbulent vassals she had to control.

He could not believe the hour was so near; but he braced himself to bear the inevitable with his usual firmness. When they went how much happiness they would leave behind them! Paris would no longer be the same hollow city, with an empty heart beneath its gaiety.

He said something of the kind; he knew it would comfort Bethesda, and he knew, too, she needed comfort. Her large eyes shone upon him, now, in the deep devotion which yet did not wholly fill their capacity.

"You are happier for our coming, René?" she said, the least bit wistfully.

He answered by holding out his hand towards her across the table. She put hers in it, thimble, needle, and all.

"Are you not afraid of my pricking you?"

"I know you would not hurt me."

"True," she replied, with undue solemnity. "The needle would have to pierce my finger before it reached yours."

"Such a remark should come from René," said Mrs. Trescott. "He should be the one to save the other pain."

"Of course he would; but need I be behind him in it? A woman may suffer to save, as well as a man."

"You will be your husband's slave yet, with such notions, Beth."

"I think not, auntie," said Bethesda gravely, letting her eyes fall, and drawing away her hand.

"A man loves a woman just in proportion to the amount she exacts from him. If you accept all, and do nothing, he will be absolutely devoted."

"I would prefer losing love than degrading myself to obtain it."

"You'll get over all that when you are dependent on a man's affections. You'll have to learn wisdom then. When you marry we'll see."

"I shall never marry."

"How are you going to avoid it, Esda?" asked René, quietly.

"How?" was the startled response. "What do you mean? I can decline if need be, I suppose."

"But what if Madame Mabelle should marry again, and you should be left alone?"

"There is Margaret, and Aunt Agatha too. But Margaret and I could easily live alone together, if it were necessary."

"She may marry too."

"Well, I am not incapable of living entirely alone. Others have done it, and I can. Certainly, nothing should force me into a marriage contrary to my inclinations. I despise——"

She broke off short. She had been about, inadvertently, to blame Louise. But René did not notice the abrupt termination, for he was thinking deeply.

"Oh, see the moon," exclaimed Mabel just then, and she went to the window. "Come, Beth," she cried; "look at our last European moon."

The others rose at this, and joined her. The sky was still bright with the sunset reflections, and the slender crescent was reaping in a green field.

"I shall never see the western glories henceforth," said René, "without remembering that they are caused by the treasure beneath the sky."

"Oh, if you are going to talk poetry I will withdraw!" exclaimed Mabel, and went back to her seat restlessly.

There was a little pause on the balcony, then René whispered:

"Thou art like the moon, Esda, and thou drawest me in every drop of my veins, as the moon draws the sea."

She did not reply, but her face was eloquent.

Presently she began to say:

"You know sometimes it is said that the old moon is in the arms of the new, and that the effect is caused by the earth's light shining on the shadowed portion, and the sun's light on the other. There's a little lesson in science for you, and here's

one—in a deeper science perhaps. You can think, if you like, when you see the moon so, that where others shine on me, and where you shine on me, René, there is the same difference.”

Her voice sank to a pathetic loveliness in the last words, and René felt almost a sense of awe at the thought of his having, for ever, this woman's devotion.

“I am as far from you, Esda, as Endymion from Diana,” he said, somewhat sadly; and he did not even touch her hand.

“Three weeks from day after to-morrow,” remarked Mrs. Trescott, as they returned to the parlour, “we will be with Margaret and Agatha. I would like to see you try to win her over,” she added abruptly, “if she didn't take a fancy to you, René.”

He laughed a little, as he asked:

“Is she so very obdurate?”

“No cajoling could cloud her judgment an instant,” was the decided answer.

“That is hardly the way René would take to win her esteem,” remarked Bethesda. “She is eminently one whose respect can be commanded, for she is very just.”

René gave her a sharp glance, and presently led her to talk about this Aunt Agatha and her husband. It was highly advisable that he should know as much as possible of the characters with which he would have to deal in meeting Bethesda in America.

These two might be somewhat formidable, he soon surmised, but he had no fear. Bethesda was bound to him by all the fidelity of her nature; he believed she would rather leave all her friends than cast him off; and within a few months she would be her own mistress, and with money at her arbitrary command. He did not hesitate to look clearly in the face the possibility of her living alone—with some staid chaperone, of course—alienated from her friends, because of her devotion to him. His ideal woman would rather suffer this than submit to any strictures on her love; and, with all his experience, he had come to have such confidence in Bethesda that he believed her to exemplify his ideal in every respect.

But this life alone was only a matter of extreme emergency. She had tact; he counselled her, directly and indirectly, to use it. There was no need of offending her family; no sacrifice would be asked if she concealed what little Madame

Mabelle did not know, and go her own way without consulting others.

He stimulated her ambition also, both as woman and as artist. He wished her to shine in society ; to take her place as queen of her peers. He desired to have increasing cause to be proud of her, and to think that this beautiful, cultured woman, whom many adored, was inalienably his. The more renowned she became, the loftier grew his station ; the more suitors she refused, the more triumph for him. She should be a brilliant woman, and a woman of intellect, and, in both positions, feel her dependence on him.

She was not slow in responding to the carefully concocted excitant. If she wondered at his lack of jealousy, she argued that it only proved his absolute faith in her, and no vows were needed in her determination to be worthy of such trust.

At no time were the anxieties and embarrassments of the life she had planned, ignored. Neither were the shadows and sorrows unrecognised ; indeed, she comforted herself with the thought that, since life can never be unmixed joy, the very rocks in her path were assurances of its stability. Were it otherwise, it would be too ethereal to endure.

The transmutation of forces gained mutually by René and Bethesda caused him to feel far more deeply than even before, and had developed in her the use of her eyes. No longer was one to be controlled by simple intelligence, or the other by intuition. They exchanged their distinguishing masculine and feminine attributes, and each partook of the strength of the other. In seeking Bethesda's intellect René had been roused to the enthusiasm of her emotional nature, and that now inundated all primary aims. In responding to the claims of René's intellect, hence finding the need of reason and discrimination, Bethesda developed her natural capacities with rapidity. Through her he found the passion which warms ; through him, she found the reason which steadies. She no longer was tossed from this to that, but had some things in which she could trust, some ideas by which she could hold firm ; and his life was no longer that of an observer from a lonely standpoint, but the intense existence of eager participation, striving for the best.

Such were they to one another, and now they were to separate.

The last evening lingered, and refortified itself, and lingered again. How could they break it off? But, finally, Mrs. Trescott insisted on prudence, called attention to Beth's weariness, and reminded them of the fact that to-morrow they would meet at an early hour. So the last good-nights were said, and René left.

Bethesda proceeded to gather up her work in silence, and with an unconquerable languor; Mabel, watching her, did not even dare say, Be brave! for fear the recognition of her trial would overpower her. It was hard now, but once away, once in America, matters would change; she was confident of that. Beth was a girl naturally absorbed by the present, she reasoned; the future would be a new present, and she would be absorbed by that. It may be seen that Mrs. Trescott's philosophy was easy, and, fitting herself, fitted every one else, in her opinion, equally well.

When Bethesda bade her good-night, and went out into the now dark hall, and was just about to open her own door, a voice close beside her said softly:

"Esda!"

She started, but made no sound.

"I could not leave you so, this last night," whispered René. "Tell me now, Esda, good-night."

He held both her hands in his, and drew her towards him. For a moment she did not resist. She was longing for paralysis, for death, for anything that would not tear her away.

Then she conquered her weakness, and stood upright, disengaging even her hands. He allowed it, but said in a tone of reproach her name again.

"Oh, René!" she exclaimed, in an agonised whisper; "I cannot bear it!"

"Courage!" he said, startled by her voice. "We will never be apart. And now, only good-night!"

He had secured her hand as she thrust it from her, in the sudden access of despair, and pressed it to his forehead, and eyes, and mouth. He knelt before her in the glimmering darkness, and laid the soft palm on his head—a proud head that had never bowed to any one but her.

"I am all yours, Esda," he said solemnly, as if taking a vow.

His outstretched arms sank until they formed a circle around her feet; he pressed his lips to one arched instep, and

then the other; and she, wildly, let him do it. Her whole soul was in a tumult, a deafening uproar of passion and woe; and yet not a sound escaped into the still night.

At last, with a violent effort, she moved, and said, in accents he never forgot:

“Go! Go!”

He sprang to his feet, without touching so much as a fold of her long black robes, and she, laboriously, painfully, turned and entered her room.

Not a word was spoken, and before the door closed he went quickly away.

CHAPTER XVIII.

“She felt like one locked in the Garden of Eden all alone—alone with all the ravishing flowers, alone with all the lions and tigers. She wished she had told the secret when it was small. . . . At first it had been but a garland, then it had become a chain, now it was a ball and chain.”

GEO. W. CABLE.

“No one can save you but yourself, for no one can so often tell you the truth.”—AUERBACH.

RENÉ went with his friends as far as Calais, and as the train sped through their dear France with a swiftness Bethesda longed unceasingly to clog, a quietude in her companions made Mabel declare she would try a nap. René assisted her to make herself comfortable, and then returned to his seat beside Bethesda. She was pale this morning, but brave, and René kept constantly in both their minds the fact that she or her aunt should have a daily good-morning from him while in England, and frequent letters in America; and Bethesda responded to it all with an eagerness to be hopeful that was akin to pain.

There came a somewhat serious pause at last, however, which Bethesda broke by saying:

“Who would ever have thought we should like one another, from the way we first met? Do you know, auntie has never told me what that quarrel was?”

“Don’t speak of it! It was a foolish affair; I cannot understand myself in it—now.”

“Had you not better tell me?” asked Bethesda, a grave trust in her voice. “Auntie will be sure to make me know

some time. I have already avoided it many times. I thought perhaps you would rather I should hear it first from you."

"My invaluable guide!" exclaimed René. But he hesitated; his brows contracted, and he flushed a little. Then he said: "Yes; I will tell it to my conscience. She should know all. It was a small thing, but it makes me ashamed, especially before your eyes."

"Therefore I ought to know it; yes?"

Her manner was of the gentlest, and expressed a desire to do only what was truest for him. He fully appreciated it; but it was no easy task his conscience required of him. However, with a new imperious instinct, he did as she bade him.

"When I first met your aunt," he began hurriedly, "Louise had left me only long enough for me to feel my loneliness and bitter disappointment, and yet not sufficient time had elapsed for me to have become accustomed to my position. Then there was a something, I know not what, about Madame Mabelle which puzzled me. I know now it was the contrast of American and French customs, which I did not appreciate in its real extent. Well, I took her at last as my confidante, for an imaginative fancy for some being whom I wished I might know and love. The quality of exaggeration which you are aware she possesses made this seem to her very wicked. She knew I was married—she knew nothing more. She took the matter far more seriously than I ever meant it, and she became extremely angry, and wrote that she renounced me with scorn for ever. I do not pretend to defend myself; but I could not bear the imputation she had put upon me. I determined to meet her and eradicate that impression, for I knew it was only the weakness of a weak moment. Now, I blush at my folly; I hate it as much as you can do, Esda. It was like talking in my sleep; I did not know what I said,—and then you came and wakened me."

"I am glad you told me," said Bethesda, when he had finished.

"You are not angry, dear Esda?" asked René, leaning forward to look full in her face. She raised her eyes to his without hesitation.

"No, I am not in the least angry."

"And you do not blame me—very severely?"

"I am your conscience," she said, with a faint smile. "I

blame you no more than it." After a moment's pause she added: "It was weak, but I believe, as you say, it was only momentary. You asked forgiveness of yourself, as well as of Aunt Mabel. In the future it can be forgotten."

"Yes, we will not think of it more," he answered, with a long breath. "I am relieved that you know it, but now it may fall into oblivion. Give me your hand a moment, Esda."

She put her gloved hand in his with her usual sweet dignity, and the train sped on several miles while silence joined instead of separating them.

Presently Mrs. Trescott roused herself, and then came Calais, and the blue, foamy Channel.

"To-morrow a letter from me will be crossing it," said René, seeing Bethesda blanch.

"And in two weeks or less we will be on the ocean," added Bethesda.

With her all this was but the prelude. Where the Channel would now interfere with their meeting the interminable ocean would divide them then. But she strove to be brave, and succeeded. She still defied that hungry beast of grief, stealthily creeping towards her, ready to spring.

As the boat cast off she threw back her head proudly, and looked to the land with shining eyes. He was on the quay, and she on the vessel, and the blue waters grew wider and wider between them, who perhaps would never meet again. It was only the beginning, she knew, but her face was quiet, even glad. How great was her gain! Immeasurable; imponderable. Grief could have little effect upon it.

And René stood watching her, so beautiful, so graceful, so brave, until he longed to leap to her, never again to part. Each throb of the engine, each turn of the wheel, seemed to hit and hurt him as long as he could hear or see. And, as he turned away at last, when the ship had become a speck, and the smoke was all that could be distinguished, he felt a *serrement du cœur* which frightened him.

She had taken not only herself away, which meant much, but she was draining his veins of their life-blood by her absence. He commenced now to understand that this unity of life means pain as well as joy; that to disintegrate a double spiritual life is like disintegrating a physical life, which produces agony. She had suffered it all a thousand times in anticipation; he,

man-like, did not know what it meant until it was upon him. But he had to endure it at its worst now, while she was counting over the treasure she had amassed, and finding it golden.

In London Evra and Mrs. Conover were at the station to welcome them, and when they reached the house everything was cosy and bright. It was almost like a home-coming, so warm were the motherly cares of Mrs. Conover and the tender solitudes of Evra. Indeed, to Bethesda it was but a foretaste, as each incident had been since they left Paris.

Mrs. Trescott was lodged in a stately room upstairs, but Evra carried Bethesda off to her own room, and, showing a dainty boudoir beyond, said :

"Here, darling, you are to share these with me. Now, no denying, sweet ; you would break my heart. I know you like to sleep alone, so I have had a little bed put in the dressing-room. It is comfortable, but I hope sometimes you will be persuaded to make me a little visit. Now, let me look at you ; I have not had a chance yet. My loveliest of women ! I did not remember you were so beautiful, and yet I have only dreamed of you since we parted."

She caught Bethesda to her in a passionate embrace. The girl submitted at first, then freed herself with a slight shudder.

"What is the matter?" asked Evra quickly.

"Oh, I am so tired !"

"True, dear ; I should have remembered. May I help you ? You will let me be maid ? I wouldn't lift a finger for myself, but for you !——"

Bethesda yielded, more submissively than gladly. She felt a miserable sense of inadequacy before this frank and craving love. She was barren of the power of giving, because she was asked too much. It was, as it had always been, with this difference : now her capacity for passionate devotion had been tested, and found ample ; and still there was none—none of the kind asked—for Guinevere.

The supple lady served Bethesda with swiftness and delight ; occasionally a little awkward in her humble position, but only sufficiently so to occasion a laugh now and then, which made feeling between them less tense and healthier. They chatted incessantly meanwhile ; Evra with an excited pleasure in being able to talk once more to this queen of her heart,—Bethesda eagerly, not to let a pause come.

Just as they were leaving the room Bethesda, fresh as a dewy tea rose in her Parisian toilette, her hair showing all its character beside Evra's golden curls, as it showed its sunniness beside M. d'Isten's dark head, and a new dignity and repose in her carriage, Evra turned towards her and seized both hands, scrutinising her an instant.

"Lily, there is something new come to you. Don't deny it. You are not the same as you were. You shall tell me to-night," and without allowing Bethesda to speak, she drew the girl's hand through her arm and led her into the parlour.

Soon after dinner some callers were announced, much to Evra's vexation, but they had to be admitted, and the evening passed very agreeably to Bethesda in music and conversation. When the last guest left Mrs. Trescott bade the others a tired good-night, warning the girls not to talk too long.

"Leave your confidences until to-morrow," she said; but when were girls ever known to follow such wise advice?

Bethesda would gladly have done so; she dreaded the next two hours inexpressibly. Only the night before had her limbs been weighted by that faintness which a woman surmounts with a half-numbed struggle, such as an opium-eater feels when fearing to succumb to his fatal drug. So much had happened since then, and here was another trial to endure.

But to-morrow she would rest; to-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow! How many days were before her! Not even one had passed yet, and it seemed æons of time; for the long years to come weighed upon these moments, and made each seem crushing in its excessive heaviness. After all, perhaps it was as well that she should be actively employed, and not be left to her thoughts.

Presently the two white figures were seated in the dim parlour, face to face. They were both silent for a while. Bethesda was waiting, bracing herself, and slowly succumbing to a half-remorseful pity. Guinevere was feeling intensely, sending word after word back from her lips to seek the one that should not offend and yet should lead to enlightenment.

At last, with a sudden impulse that shattered the impotence of her strivings, she laid her hand over Bethesda's, and broke out in a suppressed and choking voice:

"Tell me, Lily, what has changed you?"

"Am I changed? How, dear?"

She was no longer apprehensive. She might reserve a part of the truth, but this true friend should know a part also. She felt herself the stronger of the two. The woman, with her myriad resources, had replaced the inexperienced girl.

Meantime Evra answered her questions passionately.

"How? Why, in everything; in yourself, Beth. You are not what you were. You turn the same face to me, but I cannot reach you, you are so far away. You are unapproachable," her voice fell with a hopeless break in it; "I shall never reach you. Before, there was a chance; now, there is none."

Her head sank on the arm of the *causeuse*, and lay there helpless and forlorn.

Bethesda did not attempt to answer her half-incoherent utterances, but she laid her hand on the golden tangle caressingly, and kept silence, while every echo of the impassioned words died away. Then, very low, she said:

"Dear, I will tell you why I am changed. I have renounced definitely all thought of marrying."

"But why?" asked Evra, straining her eyes to read the fair face so near her.

"I have decided it is best; why, I cannot say. I can only tell you this: I go home to think only of my writing."

"And is this sadness—for you are sad, darling—because you have determined this?"

"Perhaps."

The little word trembled away into stillness before another was said. It was a peculiar faculty that Bethesda possessed of making commonplace expressions contain the meaning of her own nature. Guinevere keenly appreciated it.

"If you are so sorry," she ventured presently; but Bethesda interrupted her.

"It is done, dear."

"So you are to be a vestal virgin," resumed Evra after a pause, a pause that said much. "It is what you should be, dear; you were made for it. No one person ought to monopolise you."

"I think I have been living towards this from my cradle," said Bethesda in a far-away tone.

"We are only closer together for this, pet," said Evra, bending forward to take Beth in her arms. But she was prevented.

"I am farther from all my friends for this; farther from all I have heretofore known. My work will unite me to all those who work, but personally——"

"You will have adoring friends, of whom I shall be the first," interrupted Evra. "We are alike in many things; we must give one another mutual aid; we will never marry, but we will always be friends, and, dear knows, I need one enough!"

She showed her relief by immediately beginning to talk of her own affairs.

She had had a trying time in Milan, but had been successful. She had met the man to whom she had once been engaged, and her whole nature shrank from him in a crawling repulsion. He had done everything he could to injure her, and finally climaxed his insults by offering her again his hand, which she must accept as the price of his desisting from an active enmity. She had of course refused it with scorn, and had finally triumphed by being engaged for the next London season. The whole affair had worn upon her, however, and given her a fierce contempt for human nature, which made her look upon Bethesda Hamilton as the one pure, true soul in the universe.

The remainder of the *tête-à-tête* passed easily, and the sitting broke up in the wee hours, both relieved if weary. But the following week was most trying to Bethesda. Evra could not endure a moment out of her sight. Callers were snubbed, and all but the most important engagements broken, because she was determined to extract every possible drop of companionship out of these fast-fleeting hours. Bethesda felt an uneasiness almost amounting to pain in this exigent intercourse. How was she to conceal her feelings from so suspicious and passionate an adorer? For her whole existence inwardly was now absorbed in longing. The beast did not spring upon her, but numbed her at times into a deadly anguish. Misery, too deep and black to be accounted for, engulfed her in its resistless waves. Resistance, indeed, was impossible; passivity alone was left.

To Evra she accounted for this by physical fatigue, and begged her not to worry Mrs. Trescott with it, and Mabel suspected nothing of it. They saw one another comparatively little, as she still had some shopping to do peculiar to London,

and, absorbed in her own affairs, fancied Beth led an easy, enjoyable life, while the hard work was kept from her. And Bethesda called on her pride to an unlimited extent in seeming happy before her aunt. She would have considered it an unforgivable sin to let a suspicion suggest itself that the new interest in her life was other than unalloyed delight. Moreover, this curious black oppression that suffocated her at times seemed alien and causeless. It came upon her without reason, and left her likewise. To lay it to the charge of her rare happiness would have been the extreme of illogical foolishness in her opinion ; but had it been otherwise, she would not have wavered an instant in thinking she was happy beyond most.

The only lightings of real relief that came to these alternations of smothered struggle and smothering despair were when René's letters arrived. They usually came before Evra was up in the morning, and when the maid appeared, bearing on her salver the welcome epistle, what a *réveille* sounded in Bethesda's ears ! All the bat-like horrors hastened away, and joyous daylight reigned supreme.

"When I look at the sky luminous with stars, or at all that God has made the symbol of His omnipotence, I see nothing that shines in immensity as thou dost in my existence. Picture to thyself a man as he prays before the altar absorbed in devotion. He is penetrated by God, and adores Him. In this moment I am enwrapped in a similar enthusiasm. I adore God, but through Béthesda."

Such words as these came in detached pages of the letters Beth handed to her aunt. They were marked "Béthesda," and thus were free from oversight. From the girl herself half their sweetness was stolen by this concealment, but she let it serve her purpose. She laid the blame all on society. Love was pure ; their love was pure. Had he been unmarried, every one would have considered the two eminently suited to one another, as her aunt often declared ; and Bethesda had unconsciously fallen into the position of considering René d'Isten virtually unmarried. Only superficially did society hold him to Louise. Interiorly society could not bind him, and here he could give himself to her, as he did and should. But with the rights of Louise Bethesda had no thought of interfering. Just in so far as she recognised them she respected them. She and René would

take what remained, and what made her great happiness; no matter what *tristesse* might lurk beneath, she was profoundly grateful. For there was in the deepest earnestness of Bethesda's nature a devotion which made all suffering in its service insignificant. Those who, even through martyrdom, gained the heights of self-sacrifice in some great cause, she looked upon with reverence as enviable beings.

Mabel Trescott, on the other hand, was very willing to lead an easy life if fate would let her. The ecstasies of self-abnegation, the delight of self-development at any cost, did not appeal to her so much as comfort and quiet every-day living.

Could there have been a greater contrast? One straining after the high, far stars of absolute truth and love, regardless of her footing; the other wrapped, Cleopatra-like, in the Oriental folds of a luxurious ease, which in spite of desires could not give her content. And it seemed the very irony of fate that the one to swerve from rectitude of life was she who had its highest ideals and strived with earnest purpose to embody them.

Meanwhile some curious renewals of old experiences linked the present to the past.

One day a box came to Miss Hamilton from her bankers. It was some five feet square, and marked from Italy. Interest was high as the four gathered round it, and presently when it was discovered to be a picture, frame and all, Mrs. Conover remarked:

"My dear, I believe it is a parting gift from Signor Straora."

The last wrappers were undone, and the canvas was lifted out. Bethesda flushed as she saw it, and was silent; but the others compensated by their exclamations.

It was a two-thirds portrait of Bethesda; and yet it was not alone a portrait but a type. The artist seemed to have seized the spirit of past centuries, whose meaning is constantly recurring in the individual development of humanity. There was a suggestion of the most ancient of civilisations in the straight lines of the chair in which the figure was seated; the white robe, disclosing faultless neck and arms, had a brodered zone around the waist which Isis might have worn; and the hair was so caught that it seemed precisely the girl's way of arranging it at the same time that it recalled something beyond and before the classic.

There was no denying that it was an admirable picture. Evra went into raptures over it; Mrs. Trescott congratulated herself that she had forwarded its accomplishment, and even Bethesda recognised herself and something æons before herself in it. The eyes, which met the spectators' fully, yet inscrutably, fascinated her. She found herself constantly trying to elucidate their character.

They were yearning, and mysterious, and haunting in a certain undefined pathos. She thought if Signor Straora should see her now he would find that changed; her yearning satisfied, her mystery revealed. Yet, was it? Was there not something deeper and larger than the most complete individual life could satisfy? The connection of all humanity with this one human soul made her see herself greater and smaller than ever before. The marriage of minds was eternal as the ages and the spirit which vivified them; but could any one person absolutely satisfy another? She was an atom, and yet she was an integral part of her race, which are "as gods;" could, then, another atom fill her whole being?

Here she pushed thought away, as *l'éze majesté*. She would not listen to treason, she asseverated, but her mind inevitably returned to the same idea.

No one thing could have taken the teacher's part in this dim time so effectively as this inanimate canvas; and Signor Straora, in his loneliness, and the aching void which had been left anew by the despatch of this semblance of his wondrous maiden, would have been content had he seen Bethesda in some solitary hour, leaning on the table before his painting, and trying to find her way, with its help, into the depths of self.

No word came from the sender of this precious gift, but Bethesda and Mrs. Trescott both wrote him. Bethesda's letter was a curious betrayal of the intimacy the picture had established between the artist and his model:—

"I have always wished," she wrote, "that I could have an objective ideal towards which I could live, and have sometimes wondered if a portrait depicting my best qualities in their full development would not inspire me to improvement. You have seized the very kernel of my thought, but have presented it in a new way. You have given me myself, my possibilities, as a

problem to be solved. I shall not be content until I have explained the mysteries you indicate. The Sphinx must speak, if but a whisper in my ear; and then we shall see if you can find that answer!"

CHAPTER XIX.

"Then my soul went out to him. . . . And where there had been selfish pride before, was written Rāma; and where there had been hope, or joy, or beauty, was written Rāma; and where there had been dreams of unknown bliss, was written Rāma; and where there had been God and heaven, was written Rāma."—*Iliad of the East*.

"There cannot be a pinch in death more sharp than this is."

Cymbeline.

ONE morning, two days before Mrs. Trescott and Bethesda expected to leave London, a letter came from René to Bethesda. She had incidentally mentioned in one of her letters that they were going to hear Patti that evening, and he now declared that this (?) attraction made it impossible for him to stay longer in Paris, and that he would arrive by the night boat, and appear in the box as a surprise to Madame Mabelle; but he could not keep it as a surprise for one who must know all his actions and divine every thought.

This letter was handed Bethesda when she was just awake, and she felt her brain whirl as she thought he was already in the city! To-night I shall see him! To-night! her heart cried.

Then she bethought herself. He must not be allowed to stay in the city all day and they not meet, no indeed! He had mentioned the hotel where he would stop, and she would take the responsibility of asking him to breakfast. It was a very irregular meal, which each one generally took at a different time; she usually alone. Perhaps this morning she would not be alone!

After sending her message she flitted around like a humming-bird. Every fear and vestige of gloom had fled. The vague stirrings towards a new life were charmed into slumber by this renewal of loved bonds. She had half expected some such sudden decision on René's part. In his place she would have done the same, and now her secret impatience gave

colour to her cheeks, and winged her footsteps, as if by moving quickly even around the house she could hasten towards him.

When she went into the parlour she ran up to her portrait and fluttered the letter before its insistent eyes. "Now, *now* you will be satisfied!" she exclaimed.

But, as she waited, she found herself too often confronted by that questioning glance which finally turned into a reproach, so that at last she caught up a shawl, and threw it over the face.

"There!" she exclaimed aloud, and tried to forget it.

The clock must surely be wrong; she had said nine, and it was now only a quarter after eight. No, her own snail-like watch agreed with it. Now time was so long, and how swift it would fly if he were there! Why couldn't the long moments be given then, and the short ones now?

She stopped her impatient steps before the mirror; did she really look like that haunting picture? A slender figure, all in white, with a crimson rose against the throat; a head exultantly carried; a fair face, with dark eyes shining joyously, was what she saw. She could not help smiling as she tucked back a wilful lock of hair. It surely was more golden than usual to-day, because it knew he liked it so.

Hark! a carriage! And stopping here! She rushed towards the door to run and meet him, but the thought of the servants deterred her. She forced herself to sit down and open a book. The letters were gigantic, and grew dark and light before her eyes.

She rose as he came in, but she could hardly stand; and, as soon as the door closed, he sprang forward, and bowed before her, and clasped and kissed the little hands nestling in his.

Then he led her to a sofa, and they sat down side by side. Before long—in a moment, it seemed—the servant returned to announce breakfast. Bethesda, now restored to quick thoughtfulness, sent the maid to see if Mrs. Conover was up, and sped herself to Mrs. Trescott.

"Auntie! auntie!" she cried, and, in her first wakening, Mabel guessed René had come.

"You dazzle me like a sunbeam, child. Run down, and take breakfast. Don't wait for me. You must both be hungry," she said, when told of the surprise.

"Hungry!" exclaimed Beth, but she was off with childlike impetuosity.

René found her, in this sweet excitement, simply entrancing. The ordinary English breakfast was a feast for gods waited upon by her. The little hands fluttered among the china and silver like self-important birds, and the coffee that ensued was nectar.

A dozen times he rose when the waiter was gone on the pretext of passing her things, just to have her throw back her head and look up at him, with the clear, joyous, loving soul in her eyes. The morrow's parting was forgotten in to-day's reunion.

When they finished Bethesda excused herself to call Guinevere; her daily duty, as she explained, "and I must not neglect it, for she is dreadfully jealous."

"And what am I?" asked René, smiling.

"I don't think you could be jealous of me," she replied simply. As he opened the door for her he bowed reverently. No; one who held her heart had no cause to be jealous.

When Bethesda returned to the parlour Mrs. Trescott was with René. She had thrown off the shawl from Bethesda's portrait, and René was studying it keenly.

"Well?" said Bethesda, somewhat nervously.

"It is not—Esda," he said, in a rather sharp tone, which softened curiously in pronouncing her name.

"No, it is not like me now, is it?" she cried.

The strange, haunting, rebuking eyes checked the warm blood in her veins. She looked appealingly at René, and he gave her a warm, reassuring gaze.

"I have not seen you so—of late. It is beautiful, but too solemn for one who is happy. It is not our sunny Béthesda, and we will hide it away again."

The girl gave a sigh of relief as just then Mrs. Conover came in and welcomed M. d'Isten cordially. Evra soon joined them also, but her courteous phrases were a little cool. She at once proceeded to tuck Bethesda under her arm with a claiming authority, and Monsieur d'Isten devoted himself discreetly to Mrs. Trescott.

The ladies were to leave on Wednesday afternoon to catch the steamer, which sailed on Thursday too early for the morning train. M. d'Isten asserted he should not leave them until the last minute now. They pressed the Conovers to accompany them also, part of the way at least, but Mrs. Conover took Bethesda

aside, and represented to her how important it was that Evra should be in the city, until the plan was reluctantly relinquished.

Guinevere during these last days was silently unhappy. She felt hurt, thrown back upon herself, and bitterly disappointed in this longed-for visit. She could not have told the reason for this, and when Bethesda came with the little caresses that would have been glad to comfort and please her, Evra would stifle what she then termed her miserable suspicions, and try to satisfy her hunger on this meagre food.

The evening before their departure the party broke up late, and when the others had retired Bethesda and Guinevere lingered together, talking not altogether easily for a while. At last Evra rose abruptly, and bringing a finely-carved box unlocked it, and showed Bethesda its contents—her own letters.

"These are what I have read and re-read, night after night, child," she said, with a mournful accent, "even since you have been here."

Bethesda looked at her, dazed and remorseful. If they only had let her speak, at least of the literary compact, she might perhaps have made the change better understood. Neither René nor Mabel had approved, however, and she yielded. Now she wished she had not, but the affair told at this juncture would take on undue proportions, or would tell more than she could tell, for her secrets were entwined with another's, and she must guard his honour even more carefully than her own.

So she said nothing. In a moment the cover fell, and Guinevere turned the key, and moved to go.

Bethesda sprang after her. She could not endure this silence. She laid her hands on the tall shoulders before her and lifted her face in the full blaze of the chandelier.

"Evra," she said, "do you trust me?"

"Next to God," was the solemn reply.

"Then listen," spoke Bethesda breathlessly. "I cannot tell you what has changed me; that I am changed you quickly discovered, but that is something of which I dare not speak. I ask you to rest in this: I am as true to you as I ever was; I am no more unworthy your love than I always have been. Love me, Evra, dear, and don't be afraid that there is not a large, warm place in my heart for you, whatever its changes."

Her eyes were deep, and shining with a deeper purpose. Evra's were swimming in tears.

"I do believe you," she said, winding her arms around the girl. "I believe you and love you; how much, God only knows."

The hours came in swift succession. Hardly had the good-nights been said, it seemed, than the good-mornings were to say. The two girls went into the parlour the next morning arm-in-arm. There was a closer feeling between them than at any time since they had parted in Florence, but they were both subdued. Guinevere was oppressed by the sense of the long separation to come, and Bethesda was insensibly allowing the undercurrent of her life, during this fortnight, to come to the light of recognition. All this was only the overture—the overture where the wailing sorrow to come is foretold, and the mind prepared for a tragedy.

Alas, only until to-morrow!

As they waited for the train in the station Guinevere held her Lily with a painful grasp; and when they were off the last thing Bethesda saw was a pale face set in golden curls, whose features were drawn with pain. It haunted her for long, with a dim sense of being unworthy of such affection. But the next farewell?

When they reached Liverpool they found Marcot, who had been engaged by the ladies for their American home, had secured them pleasant rooms, and M. d'Isten outdid himself in surrounding the ladies with delicate attentions. The fact that he had them once more to himself was evidently satisfactory to him.

To Bethesda, too, it was a rest, and when presently René proposed reading aloud to them, nothing could seem to have been more happily chosen, as it suited the fatigued indolence of Mrs. Trescott as well as Bethesda.

The piece he had selected was a eulogy of women; sincere and ardently poetical, and he read it with fervour. Instances of devotion were gathered from every land, and as they were told Bethesda felt the power to do each one. Still she felt strangely within herself the capacity of being more utterly filled. She wished the thought of René to fill every recess, each small and large space in her soul, as air would any vacancy, and she was perplexed that her love did not make it so.

But of one thing she was sure ; she was inseparably bound to him, and through life and eternity nothing but unworthiness could separate them.

He looked up from his book as she thought this, and found Bethesda's eyes shining on him with a glory of surrender. She had risen in the last few moments, and now stood by the mantel, leaning upon it. As she met his eyes he sprang to his feet and would have thrown himself at hers, had they been alone. As it was he turned away abruptly to regain his startled self-control.

Why should she feel differently to him to-night than ever before ? he asked himself. Why should she now, just now, when they were about to part, melt the incomparable pearls of her nature in one peerless draught, and offer it to him with such imperial grace ?

Why, indeed, except just because they were about to part, and the woman's heart cried passionately :

"These are the last moments ; we may never see each other more. Let our spirits meet now while they may."

In her rapture, in her almost agonised rapture, she could have rejoiced had there been some supreme way in which she could prove her love and so die. Shrink from what other women have done ? Rather, their acts were miserably petty ; yet she envied them ! They could at least prove their love to all the world, but she must seal her lips, and hide what she would have been proud to proclaim to every creature. And their eyes meeting, both realised at this moment that death would be the dearest boon of life.

They went on board early the next day, and as René felt the little quiver of Esda's hand he said cheerily :

"The next time I am on an ocean steamer will be coming to you. You can rest in my coming."

And Esda clung closer to his arm, resting on the present, in any case, whatever she might do on the future.

The two were constantly together ; they promenaded the deck arm-in-arm, and talked and laughed quite as if a week were still before them, only in Bethesda's mind there was that half-insane, half-numbed sense that soon she would awake with the grip of a monster agony at her heart. She said nothing of it, however, and her conversation and appearance were as bright and sunny as the rippling abysses of the sea.

René did not surmise what she felt, for he felt nothing of the kind. Last night's anguish had passed for him, and the future, if not all sunshine, had never looked so surely happy to him as now. He could look forward to tens and twenties of years, and see that same light shining on his existence still, that same immutable tenderness permeating his being, and rendering everything it touched beautiful and sweet. He was a man of strong habits, and the wearisomeness of continuity was never to be feared with him; rather, the longer he possessed a thing the more attached he became to it. And there was a rarity about Béthesda Hamilton which made him well aware he should never find her equal; indeed, had he not been seeking her in vain for thirty years? He had never spoken a truer word than when he said she completed his existence.

This completeness, too, was not disturbed by what he considered the inevitable fate of their walking their paths separately, divided even by the sea. For he was not a dishonourable man. Brought up in the surroundings and traditions of his country, such a passionate *amitié* as this had become was, to his conscience, no sin. It was more than excusable, it was justifiable, even praiseworthy. He occupied precisely the same position to his wife that he had done for years, and one she had deliberately chosen; he wronged no one. Béthesda was entirely free; he claimed nothing from her. What she gave he accepted as the bounty of a generous heart; what he gave to her was, as she had told him, and he was glad to believe, her greatest joy.

That she should not marry could not, with his experience, seem any great sacrifice, and she would not be lonely with her sister, her writing, and the knowledge that he was always devoted to her. The whole matter seemed to him inalienably settled; it could not be altered now; no one could interfere. They had agreed together that they should not take any one's word but each other's in regard to their relations, and thus all misunderstandings were definitely precluded.

They were so engrossed with one another that they noticed no one on board, although most of the accumulating six hundred souls who weighted the vessel had seen and commented on them. No wonder that both thought Mrs. Trescott guessed their open secret when outsiders saw through it at a glance.

No wonder, either, that they thought she did not disapprove when she left them alone as much as possible, while appearing as affectionate to both as she had ever been.

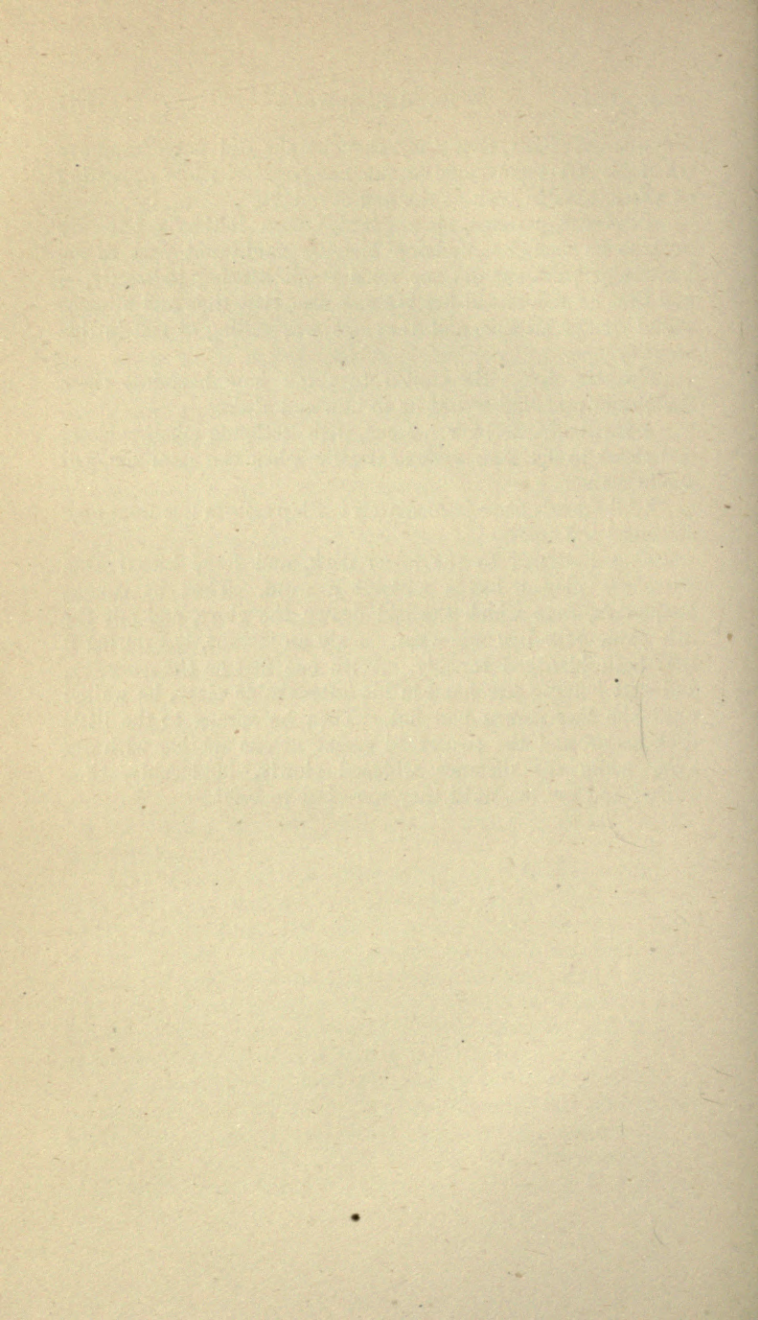
René was, perhaps, more guarded than Bethesda, but only because he thought Madame Mabelle might not care to acknowledge what she did not mind countenancing indirectly,—and then he understood her to think also, that time and absence would change all this, and that she was willing to rest in this security.

He was, too. He smiled to think how harmless these enemies of mankind would be to him and Esda.

A shrill whistle blew. René, with Bethesda clinging closer and closer to his arm, went to inquire when the fatal moment would arrive.

“All friends leave immediately! Ship sails in five minutes,” answered the officer.

They hastened to the lower deck, and René kissed Mrs. Trescott's gloved hands without a word. Then he caught Bethesda's, from which she had drawn the glove, and put the soft palm over lips and eyes. Only an instant, but during it they both blanched terribly. With one foot on the gangway, and still holding her hand in his unbreakable clasp, he waited until the last person had left. Then he sprang to the little deck below, and the two stood gazing at one another with dry eyes, while the distance widened slowly, implacably, then swifter and swifter, until they were lost to sight.



PART II.

“ Yet more, life's music holdeth more than these, . .
There is a golden chord whose harmonies
Have deeper echoes ; . . .
Our lips will smile, although our eyes are wet,
Till we life's earnest mystery have solved ;
And then, weak heart, . . .
Know that the soul which breathes immortal breath,
Stronger than joy, stronger than grief, must be,
And trample both, to reach, O God, to Thee ! ”

ISA BLAGDEN.

CHAPTER I.

“To train people to be men by keeping them children, to train people to be free except by making them free, by letting them bear the consequences of their sins and mistakes, is seen to be more and more of an impossibility. What does the whole history of the world mean, but that it is impossible,—even to God?”

OF all outward experiences, there is nothing like a sea-voyage to wrench one from old associations and habits of life. The long silence of every friend; the weary, dreary passage, where one is conscious that each turn of the screw takes one further from what one loves, and fastens the distance with unevadible decision,—this is a close enough symbol of death; and another land, bearing a general similarity to the past, yet with every part changed, is recognisable as our idea of what a new life may be.

Bethesda found this true as she went up on deck, just at dawn, the morning they reached New York. A still, calm gloom environed the ship, allowing faint outlines of the low hills to be seen. They had cast anchor, and were waiting for daylight to steam into dock. The cessation of sound and movement had given her a dizzy sensation, after the long rocking and straining of the vessel, and she had come upstairs to see if the fresh air would not dissipate it. What a voyage it had been! Not stormy in the elements; the trip had, on the contrary, been a very calm and swift one; but what a battle-field of murderous spiritual conflict this ship represented! In every corner she saw the face of some dead hope, the ghost of some ghastly agony.

When she had left Europe, and watched René's figure grow less and less as distance widened between them, she had at least felt secure of a mental unity which abolished space. They were to write frequently, and thus would be still held

together by a palpable means of communication. But now, alas! she knew the letter below, ready to be mailed, was the last she would write him for six months; perhaps the last open-hearted one she would ever write him.

This bitter change had been brought about ostensibly by Mrs. Trescott. She had only waited for Beth to rouse herself from what was more a swoon than a slumber into which she had fallen on the day they left England, to accuse her of deceit in concealing from her trusting aunt her own knowledge that she loved René d'Isten.

The fact that both the man and woman knew it had flashed upon Mabel during that last, hard good-bye, and she had been thinking of it, with a cumulative rancour, while Bethesda lay for hours wan and half lifeless before her.

She had failed in action, she had trusted too much, she told herself; she would not so fail or trust again. This affair must be seen in its true light at all hazards. She would use her authority as a knife, if need were. "If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out," was one of her favourite pieces of advice. She did not notice that the Bible command is couched in such language that it makes the plucking out of an offending eye a matter of self-subjection, of free-will, not of compulsion. She thought it emphatically her duty to pluck out her niece's organ of sight, so dimmed and unreliable was it, and then the girl might lend herself more docilely to her aunt's guidance, which was the only road to salvation out of this swamp of evil into which Beth had sunk.

"Where did this begin?" she had broken out abruptly one day. "In London? In Paris? Have you deceived me for weeks, and if so, how far? Oh, Beth! am I awake, or in a nightmare, that I can say such things and you not deny them? Do you know that he is married, *married*, I say, and do you know nothing of the world? Heavens, assure me of *something*, Beth, or I shall go mad!"

"Of what do you accuse me?" said Bethesda. Her figure was drawn to its full height, and her brows were a single tense line above eyes whose expression made even Mabel Trescott speechless.

"Of nothing, nothing," she said at last brokenly. "I only ask you, what am I to believe?"

Bethesda felt a sentiment of pity and self-rebuke begin to

dilute her indignation. She remained silent a few moments, thinking fast. René and she had agreed together that if concealment was not wrong, deception was, and now she ought no longer to remain silent. Since Mrs. Trescott had gone so far beyond the truth, Bethesda decided that it was best for all concerned that she should be frank.

She was so ; completely as far as facts were concerned, and there was a sense of freedom and upright defiance in speaking openly of what it had been a trial to her to conceal, even passively. She had consented to keep silent from motives of expediency alone, not from any sense of shame or guilt. She told her aunt, indeed, that she would be proud to have the angels in heaven look at her connection with René, and felt assured they would not disapprove. It was only the pettiness and earthiness of this world which had made them see fit not to proclaim it on the house-tops, if need were.

Mrs. Trescott listened sombrely. She knew Beth was speaking the truth. She saw she was ignorant as to the wrong of this, that her conscience was perverted ; but her darling was still innocent and pure. It was an error, a misapprehension, into which she had been unconsciously led, perhaps by an unconscious hand. The lofty tone in which Beth mentioned René impressed Mabel with an involuntary sense of his worthiness, which she was the more ready to accept from not believing it possible she could have been so mistaken in her confidence in him.

"It is a hideous wrong," she said, when Bethesda had finished. "I cannot understand your lack of perception, still less his. But that it is only blindness I see. You must be guided by me now : it is your only safety. I will go and think about it. The next step may be into an abyss or to safety."

Mrs. Trescott left her, and Bethesda had leaned against the railing at the stern, and watched the seething waves, with thoughts which were incoherent and restless and perturbed as they. The pristine clearness of her mind was beaten to an opaque mass by the repeated shocks of circumstance against emotion. It seemed to her that the whirling, eddying, foaming track would deafen her with its conflict ; and yet she must be quick to hear both the voices within and without and to distinguish which edicts were the right.

Something within her was meantime working slowly, laboriously, to an unseen end. It was as if her heart were a besieged garrison, and the dull thud of toilers in an underground mine should half reach her ear. Every sense must be on the alert, and yet she knew not which way to look for danger. As such a garrison would, however, visit every foot of wall and tower to discover any hidden weakness, so she visited the fortifications built around her heart, and was forced to admit that there were many places not impregnable.

Once conscious of this, she hastened to take treacherous conscience from the side of her foes by writing to René, and expressing her dissatisfaction in remembering their actions during the last days they were together.

"I believe you felt this as well as I," she wrote. "You did not find me keeping you on a high plane as you would have desired me ideally to have done. I should have had clearer perception, and been less blinded by emotion. I was, on the contrary, less clear-sighted than you. And I believe, deep in your mind, you blame me for it, as you should. Once I said to you—do you remember?—that we were not to forgive any evil, even to one another, until the wrong-doing had been repented. Now I repeat it, René. You must not forgive me, I must not forgive you, until we have proved our repentance for the errors we have committed."

It was when she had just finished writing this that Marcot brought her a message from Mrs. Trescott, who wished to see her downstairs. When she reached the close state-room she found Mabel sitting on the sofa with a portentous face. She made place for Bethesda beside her, and tried to take her hand. The girl evaded it. There was something in her aunt's manner which proved caresses only sugar-plums to buy some desired action, and Beth proudly resented being treated in so childish a manner.

"You wanted me?" she said.

Mabel bent forward and looked in Beth's face, while she tried to broach the subject in an easier manner. But Bethesda was on the defensive, and reiterated her question briefly.

"Yes, I did want you; I do want you," then returned Mabel; "I am yearning to do for you."

"To do what?" asked Bethesda.

"Well, I will tell you," began her aunt, and stopped.

Bethesda waited, with clear observant eyes on her companion's face.

"Beth," commenced Mabel again, this time in hurried accents, "you have often said you loved me, that you would like some way to prove your affection and gratitude to me. Now I ask you for the greatest proof you can give." She waited a moment, with one of those impressive pauses which often italicise silence as well as speech. Then she went on: "This between you and René seems dreadfully wrong to me; absolutely wicked. The past we cannot alter, but for the future you are responsible. You cannot judge clearly now, so I ask you for one year not to write to René, to let entire silence reign between you; and this, darling, because of your love for me."

Bethesda sat staring at her, wounded, stunned. How could she thus destroy for ever, perhaps, the happiness of two lives? And yet the long love for her aunt, the keen desire to prove herself not wanting in this crucial test, made her heart bleed on every side.

She could not speak at all for a while, and Mabel lavished caresses on her with a fondness not free from terror.

"Go away, please," said Bethesda at last, with unconscious authority; "I must have a chance to think." And Mrs. Trescott, taken aback, found herself to her own surprise obedient.

Presently Bethesda had slipped quietly up on deck and told Marcot to bring her portfolio without disturbing Mrs. Trescott. The man obeyed with a respectful solicitude which always reminded her of René. He had told her that Marcot had been a faithful retainer of his, and at his request she had said no one else should know it. Now she felt him an innocent link with the past, and it comforted her to think that through Marcot's devotion to René he was quick in observance of her own wishes.

After a little the fresh wind, the strong air, and salt expanse cleared the blurring mist of incapacity which had shrouded her mind, and she seemed to have a wide gray level in it, similar to that spreading beneath and around her. A sunbeam would have flawed it; a bird's wing would have hurt it; a ship would have destroyed it. In the lifeless calm she thought it out.

From their arrival in America until the New Year she

would sacrifice to her aunt all communication with René. This would assure Aunt Mabel of her deep devotion, and would serve the same purpose that a longer probation would ; for what questions could not one solve in six interminable months ? And she acknowledged there were doubts to be solved ; she told René so.

"During these months," she wrote, "we are to earnestly try to judge our past dispassionately, and see the light of truth on our future. This I believe we equally wish to do. You, no more than I, would live wilfully in the dark, covering our eyes from the sunlight. Our positions towards one another are too delicate for any but elevated minds to understand ; should we not make it a rule to command their respect ? Can we afford to lose one atom of self-respect, or respect for each other ? I am sure you will answer these questions as I do. The only real question is : Where is the wrong ? I cannot decide. I am sure of nothing, except our mutual confidence, which is as this ship bearing us across a sea of waves, the only thing steadfast on the tumultuous ocean. It does not lose its integrity and solidity, no matter how it is rocked ; and I believe it will bear us safely to port at last."

She put away the sheet, and went with a light firm step to her aunt's side.

"I have decided," she said.

Mrs. Trescott glanced quickly into the pale face, whose dark eyes shone starry with self-conquest.

"I knew you would do right !" she exclaimed, catching Beth's hand and kissing it rapturously. "I knew you would do as I said."

"Yes," said Bethesda in a low clear tone. "I have told René that he must not write me, after his answer to this letter, until the first of next January. Neither shall I write to him until then, after we reach America."

"But that is only half as long as I asked," said Mabel. Her clasp on Beth's hand loosened, and Miss Hamilton drew it quite away as she replied with steady determination :

"It is all I can give ; and it is long enough for anything you can desire. Do you remember, Aunt Mabel, that it is only four days since we left René ?" She paused a moment to collect her strength for the next words. "You must know," she

said then, "that it seems to me a cruel thing that you have asked ; unnecessary, and destructive, perhaps, of two lives' happiness. I tell you this plainly, auntie, because I wish you to realise that I do as you ask me, even when it is hardest."

Mabel kissed her hand again, and said fondly :

"I do see you love me, darling, and I think you are a very noble woman. But it is a frightfully short time, only six months. Won't you make it the year, dear? It is not much, —a year in a young life like yours."

"It is not much, did you say?" asked Bethesda, in an incredulous tone.

"No ; if there were objections to a marriage, a daughter would always wait a year, and think how much worse this is !——"

"I have given you a proof of my love written in my heart's blood," said Bethesda, "and you consider it nothing ! I can do no more, and what I have done is useless."

Then, feeling the despairing inutility of more words, she went away.

It was this which made the voyage so hard. No concession brought peace, but, on the contrary, Mrs. Trescott's appetite seemed to grow with what it fed upon. She ceaselessly encroached. Bethesda was thrown to and fro, beaten by Mrs. Trescott's ever-unsatisfied demands, until she felt herself, and all about her, dividing, and shattering, and writhing into new forms, which were no sooner made than destroyed.

If she could only have been left to herself these days the constant incursion of new thoughts, springing from the very nature of her relation to René, would have enlightened her without arousing resistance. But Mabel was indefatigable in her efforts to pluck out her niece's offending eye, until at last Bethesda barricaded herself from assault by announcing that she would make no more concessions whatsoever, and that what her aunt wished must be asked of René, not of her. Nothing would stir her from this position, and Mabel finally desisted, to throw her whole strength into a letter to René, urging him, by his knowledge of the world, his generosity, his love itself, to accord the year's silence which Beth had refused.

The evening before reaching port Bethesda had written him with a heart-wrung abandon, realising that it was her last opportunity of speaking to him freely for many dreary months ; possibly, just possibly, for ever.

"We are alone in the world together," she wrote. "We are outside the limits of society, and our only aim should be to keep our conscience free, our lives noble. Remember, René, I do not think it any gift of mine, that you hold my faith; I do not give it, it is yours. Nothing can alter this fact. You are to remember it through all these months,—to begin, for me, so soon!"

It was this poignant sense of last moments which had been all through their peculiar temptation. The consequences of present acts seemed to be cut off short by the iron hand of circumstance, which, from the first, they knew must inexorably separate them. Had it not been for these outward compulsions Bethesda would have more quickly recognised the importance of self-subjection. She was now becoming dimly conscious, through suffering, that free-will, rightly trained, is the aim of the whole discipline of life.

The day grew silently around her as she stood this last morning on the upper deck, thinking of what the voyage had brought her, and what it had taken away. A deep purple, lightening to amethyst and dull gold, then flushing to a soft rose, replaced the grayness of the east. The responsive waters brightened into opaline hues, with fire gleaming under the pearly ripples. The sky grew more and more brilliant; a few floating clouds were touched into flame, and the water answered with iridescent fervour. Finally, a golden hand of dazzling glory curved itself from the horizon to the zenith, while the water, thrilled to ecstasy, ran quivering towards the shore of the New World. Another instant, and, with a burst of splendour which thrilled like an organ peal through every nerve, the sun rose and beat down Bethesda's eyes with its shining.

Presently they were in sight of the city, sparkling in the level sunbeams, where, Bethesda knew, Margaret was awaiting them; asleep, probably, and yet impatient for their arrival.

Already the new protecting element was coming into her life as she thought of the fair-haired sister, who had always been so dear to her, and now, in her innocence and devotion, peculiarly appealed to Bethesda's lacerated heart. It pacified her to remember that Margaret knew nothing of these last weeks of intense passionate life. The story of even the literary compact with René had been reserved until they should meet

face to face, and now, perhaps, it would never be told. Ah, well, it would be restful to be with some one who did not know too much; it would be good, and sweet, and comforting. Margaret would trust her; Margaret could trust her. There should be no doubt of that.

What a thrill of familiar tenderness stirred Bethesda's heart as she espied her sister and Aunt Agatha actually on the pier, in spite of the early hour! It was totally unlike any of the emotions which had made her vital existence of late. It was the warmth of home affections and home knowledge; of the unspoken communion of memories, and of temperaments long accustomed to one another. It was simply, and all, of a family, and a sister, and a native land.

They went ashore, and Margaret cried a little as she held Beth fast, and Bethesda tranquillised her with her own eyes moist. Agatha Stanhope meantime saw that the girl had been living ahead of her strength, and that she had been experiencing far more than a mere year would account for, and she embraced her with a supporting tenderness. Then they all went off to see about the luggage, and, finally, to the hotel.

"You are to rest here until to-morrow evening, when we will go home," said Agatha, with her usual decision and searching glances at every one in turn. She saw now what made her address Mabel directly. "You will like to come? You have no plans to conflict with this? I had promised myself that we would make one another's acquaintance there, and the girls would console themselves for their long separation."

The rupture between the elder sisters had been bridged over roughly, leaving the chasm yawning beneath, but making it possible for them to meet in apparent amity. An affection of habit had mingled with the veering tendency of Mabel's mind to effect this, while with Agatha love and confidence were strong enough to arch over many fissures, and unite even deeply-divided lands. Moreover, she could with difficulty believe that the strange stream between her and Mabel would not fade away like a mirage as soon as nearness should prove its existence or unreality. It would therefore be hard to describe the keenness of her disappointment in seeing the unanswering chill in Mabel's manner.

"It is very kind of you to ask us to your house," she began now, formally. "I supposed you had already left S——. Isn't

it terribly hot there? I expected to go somewhere on the coast, the girls and I, and that you and Raleigh would, perhaps, join us later. But it was very good of you to come on here, if you were intending to go right back," she added, with a sudden impulse, and one of her warm smiles.

"I wished to see you," replied Agatha, with some quiet emphasis. "I think you will be quite comfortable with me for a week, or a month as far as that goes. I, of course, stay there as long as Raleigh does. But I would not urge you; you must do just as you prefer."

She stood with a certain royalty in her carriage and a keen light in her eyes during the instant's silence which followed. Bethesda was about to speak, but was silenced by a flying glance from Mrs. Stanhope. This was a matter between her and her sister; she was sure of the girls.

"Well, thank you, perhaps it will be best," said Mabel, after that eloquent pause. Agatha turned with a sigh of relief and a quick gentleness to Bethesda.

"What do you say?"

"I don't need to speak," replied Beth, with a dainty caress. "You know how glad I am to be with you."

Mrs. Trescott moved away with some impatience.

"Beth ought to rest now," she said abruptly; and they all adjourned to their rooms. Mrs. Stanhope went around softly after the girls were on the bed, adjusting the blinds and closing the mosquito bars, and petting them with that unobtrusive care which proves the habit of consideration for others. It was new and charming to Bethesda, and she found herself, to her own surprise, going to sleep more easily than for weeks. The tender serenity of Mrs. Stanhope's face was always before her, and in her arms nestled Margaret, softly breathing. As the fair head rose and fell on Bethesda's breast she felt as if she had taken refuge in a sanctuary, a divine stronghold where no enemy could reach to injure her. She was protected by the sweet power of an undoubted innocence.

CHAPTER II.

"The great moral combat between human life
And each human soul must be single. The strife
None may share, though by all its results may be known,
When the soul arms for battle, she goes forth alone."

OWEN MEREDITH.

"To foster and develop good in all its forms is his vocation."

KUNO FISCHER.

THE next evening they started for S——. Their party was a genial and cosy one. Mrs. Stanhope had travelled so much that the cars had become a second home to her, and she knew how to make the porters and officials as attentive as her own domestics would have been.

Poor Marcot, who was quite confused and dazed by all this new life and strange customs, was useless, and felt himself so; and Bethesda, with a smile, dismissed him to his own car.

"What did you bring him home for?" asked Margaret; and Agatha remarked:

"I should not have been surprised at it in Mabel; she is so foreign I have difficulty in understanding her——"

"But, Agatha!" remonstrated Mrs. Trescott.

"It's true," asseverated Mrs. Stanhope, "and I should have thought it quite fitting had you brought home a French servant; but I hear it was Beth's idea."

"Yes; she came back from here full of the notion. She thought it would be quite *distingué* to have a *garçon*, and was looking out for one in Italy, but we found none. There was one creature there who would be just a pleasure to have in the room, a perfect Adonis, you know, but I told Beth it would never do. He couldn't be kept in his position here, you see; he would have become insufferably vain. You don't see such handsome men in America as in Europe, especially Southern Europe, and, *en revanche*, you see nowhere such pretty women as in America. *Ma foi!* what a number of them there are! Why, at the Windsor, there were at least half a dozen girls who would be stared at from every corner on the Continent, and here they seem to be considered nothing remarkable. *A propos*, how do you think Beth is looking?"

A sudden anxiety betrayed itself in her words as she turned to look at her sister, who had been studying her quietly.

"Beth is not well," said Agatha gravely; "she seems worn and harassed. She is not looking nearly so well as you do. The voyage must have agreed with you."

"Hum! And yet I have had all the hard work while Beth was resting in London. But she is tired now. Travelling fatigues her. Why, how English this looks!" she exclaimed, breaking off from her former speech abruptly.

They were going up the Hudson River, and the daylight was still sufficient to show them the beautiful banks covered with parks and country seats. Mabel leaned across the car to attract the girls' attention.

"Wouldn't you like to live somewhere here in the summer? It would remind you, Beth, of Mrs. Randleth; and Clarence might come some time to row you up and down the Hudson instead of the Thames."

"He never did that, and I fancy he never will this," replied Bethesda indifferently.

Mrs. Stanhope noted the tone. She and Margaret had heard of this Clarence, and Agatha was seeking a reason for Beth's change. It evidently was not here.

"But wouldn't you like a summer place here, even without that inducement?" insisted Mabel. "There! that house, *par exemple*. Shall we take it, girls?"

"I had rather not talk about plans now," said Bethesda. "Aunt Agatha told us to rest first, and I feel like obeying her."

She leaned back in her seat wearily, and the loving eyes of Margaret were quick to discover it, and to see the look of troubled sadness which replaced all other expression in Bethesda's face during any lull of interest. There was something here which Margaret would leave to time to explain, or would trust to Beth without explanation. She was one of those with whom absolute confidence is the kernel of love.

All night and the following day they sped on through the strangely familiar land. They talked much, exchanging experiences—the lighter ones—telling anecdotes of travel and home life; of friends to one only, or old mutual acquaintances; of new thoughts; of memories; in fine, enjoying that renewal of old associations with congenial friends, and gauging their development, which is, to sensitive minds, a fragrant delight.

But Bethesda felt herself, at times, a stranger here. It was as if she had come with a carefully-stored memory of unimportant personal events, and the names of friends, to foist herself on them as a Bethesda Hamilton they once knew. Then, suddenly, shaming this alienation, would come a flood of tenderness, of affection, of gratitude to these dear ones, and she would give them some mute caress as an apology, or a frank acknowledgment of her feeling; at least to Mrs. Stanhope.

"It will come back," said Agatha once. "We must try to be patient, my dear; then some day, perhaps, these years that have intervened will be as strange to you as this is now."

"Oh no!" exclaimed Bethesda, with a startled shrinking; "that could not be."

"Perhaps not," replied Agatha, wisely not insisting. "You are different than you were last year, Beth. America did not seem so unfamiliar to you then, and yet you had been longer without seeing it."

"I know I have changed, Aunt Agatha. I am trying to find my way to the why of it all," she went on uncertainly. "I think it began when I came home last year; that is the way it looks to me now. Somehow, it all disappointed me; not you, dear auntie, nor Margaret, nor anything about you, which, indeed, delighted me as much as the rest dissatisfied me. I suppose I had some foolish ideal of my country which was merely a girlish notion; but the current of American life was not as pure and simple as I had expected to find it. It had lost its pristine clearness, and yet had not reached the stage of filtering, and so what I saw was turbid, I thought; at any rate, distasteful. Probably my view was very superficial and inappreciative. I have too much faith in America not to believe it was my mistake, but it influenced me strongly. I went back to Europe really feeling that was more natural to me than America, that it was to Europe I belonged. I think—I think that was where it began."

She ended more undecidedly than she had commenced, and looked with a certain appeal at Mrs. Stanhope's reliable face. It would inspire confidence in any one; every line and curve of it, as of her mind, was nobly proportioned, so that one felt no pettiness obscured her judgment or interfered with her large charity. She was pre-eminently one who helped others to help themselves, and Bethesda needed such assistance sorely then.

The silence grew quite long, however, before Agatha spoke.

"I was thinking of your mother," she said then. "You are like her in many ways. I remember when you were born your eyes went following the light around the room as soon as they opened. I told her of it, and she said: 'I trust my little daughter will always follow the light.' They were almost the last words she said."

Mrs. Stanhope spoke with an undertone of feeling and comprehension which made the familiar story take on a startling meaning to Bethesda's seeking mind. Of course Aunt Mabel had often told it to her, but now—— Why, it was like a voice from Heaven, and that voice a mother's!

Presently Agatha began talking easily on casual subjects, not seeming to notice Bethesda's silence. Her conversation was always interesting, and generally witty and merry; but there was not a sentence she uttered, no matter how light, which did not convey to a ready mind some result of penetration or trait of character, or give one an idea as a clue to the problems which abound in life. She studied every one she met, knowing human nature too well to "classify" individuals—that odious habit which is born of ignorance and breeds all manner of misunderstandings—and thus had been developed in her a discriminating love of humanity which constantly tended towards a wise development of those around her, and especially of reason and true freedom.

Bethesda found herself often shrinking involuntarily from remarks which made gashes in her past, to let the light of truth shine through; but there also came an invigoration and strength such as is gained from bitter tonics, which makes one willing to drink deep for the health gained. And there was no dear disease to which Bethesda Hamilton clung when she recognised it as such. The only thing necessary to renouncement was to convince her that what she felt was disease, and this was often hard to do.

She was being subjected now, however, to a new alchemy, and the nights were the only time when she found herself, as it were, and fused the different metals of her past and present together. It would have been difficult to accomplish this except for the ardent and ceaseless flame of her devotion to René. The fidelity of her nature to one who had been acknowledged supreme to her was as a golden chain on which her life's

incidental beads were strung, to make—yes, it should be so—a rosary.

Lying in her berth with the window-curtain drawn back, and all dark and silent in the car, she seemed to herself like a shadow fleeing through space and gazing down on her future life. It was glorious moonlight, and the prairies now spread about her with the same long lines as had done the sea. The wide grassy billows undulating away to the horizon, where rarely a tree disturbed its low line; occasionally a pond covered with water-lilies, the white blossoms like stars, amid which the moon reflected itself in the still depths; and over and around all that air which to one new from Europe seems to allow no illusion of atmosphere to heighten effect, but shows abruptly each object, even in the moonlight, and makes one realise constantly that one is in a different land.

“And it is different,” thought Bethesda, with the earnestness of resolve. “My life now will be like these prairies; monotonous, yet not petty, from the very extent of their monotony; rolling in grass and flower-covered curves to the unseen distance, with an atmosphere granting no enchantment, only clear following of one’s path of duty; and above—may they always be reflected among the lilies!—a pure ambition, and the sky.”

The moon crossed the cloudless heavens, while the fleeting scene repeated itself for mile after mile. It shone on Bethesda with a white radiance, and she welcomed it with a smile. It was the same moon which, as a crescent, she had pointed out to René. She thought of what she had told him he might remember, and that now its whole surface was resplendent in the light of the sun.

In the morning they reached S——. Raleigh Stanhope was at the station to meet them, and welcomed them with hearty cordiality. The carriage was waiting, and Marcot climbed to the driver’s seat, while Mr. Stanhope stood a moment at the door with uncovered head, and the upright, manly attitude Bethesda had always admired.

“I can’t go home with you,” he was saying, “but Agatha will take better care of you than I could, and will make you welcome to our house for as long as we can prevail upon you to stay. Good morning, ladies. Home, Jessup.”

He waited on the curbstone until they had rolled off.

"What hungry eyes that girl has!" he said to himself, as he turned and walked towards his office. He was usually on the alert when in town, but to-day two or three acquaintances passed him without recognition. "She has come to the right place for food; my wife will give it to her," he finally soliloquised, and with this confidence let the haunting face slip from his mind, and soon was engrossed in affairs.

The home to which the wanderers were welcomed was a beautiful house, situated on the best corner of a fashionable street. One could always be sure that whatever Raleigh Stanhope possessed was excellent. It was a double house, planned by Agatha, with spacious rooms and few stairs, and the large hall, shadowy, with a stained-glass window at the division of the staircase, was its *chef d'œuvre*. There were a few fine pictures and statues against a chocolate-coloured wall, and the wood-work was handsomely carved. Nothing about the house was common. The ornaments were elegant and of pronounced value, but never showy; while each apartment presented an aspect distinctively handsome and stately. Mrs. Trescott thought it a little cold and stiff; but Bethesda delighted in the house, and found it eminently characteristic of its owners. One could see at a glance that money or treasure of any kind was a means, not an end, in this household, and that an intelligent generosity held the purse-strings.

"It is all so beautiful and solidly restful!" exclaimed Bethesda, her weariness forgotten, as her spirit often did ignore the cries of her body. "It is just like you, Aunt Agatha," and she went to lay her cheek against Mrs. Stanhope's shoulder with a momentary caress.

"How much you two are alike," said Margaret; "aren't they, Aunt Mabel? I never noticed it before."

The resemblance was indeed quite marked. Mrs. Stanhope was somewhat taller than Bethesda, and the slender grace of the one had developed into a noble maturity in the other; but the long, fine lines of each were alike, and the colouring similar. Agatha's hair was a darker shade of Bethesda's; her eyes a clear blue, not large, but extraordinarily searching, and capable of great tenderness. But the loveliest feature of her face was her mouth. It was well shaped by nature, and the lips were pink as an oleander blossom. No one noticed, however, these attributes in considering the complete beauty of expression that

gave its supreme attraction. It was tender, sweet, chastened, resigned; it was cheerful, hopeful, dainty, devoted; it was expressive of a rounded development of character as rare as it is priceless, and as comforting as it is inspiring. This it was that caused Bethesda to remark a little sadly:

"There is no one I would more like to resemble, but I fear I never shall."

"Thank you, dear," said Agatha softly. "Now, shall we go upstairs?"

"Aunt Mabel," exclaimed Bethesda a moment later, "I want you to notice how comfortable everything is. There is not a single article which is not of use, either in suggestion or action. That is what makes the house so perfect to my mind."

"It is not perfect yet," said Agatha, smiling at her niece's enthusiasm. "There is still much to be done. When I have it quite perfect, of which there is no immediate danger, I shall wish to build again."

"That is a *bizarre* notion," exclaimed Mabel. "I am so different. The longer I live anywhere, and the better it suits me, the more devoted I become to it. I like even a chair and a window that I am used to. But you never did have the love of place I have."

"It is possible that one who judged from the facts might not agree with you," remarked Agatha in her quiet way.

"Oh, it hasn't been *my* fault that I have been tossed around the world so. It has always been a sacrifice of myself to others. I should have had a home long ago if it had not been for these girls, especially Beth's health and studies. Oh!"—she broke off suddenly at the door of the apartment assigned to her—"what a *ravissante* room! And how Frenchy it is!"

Then, for the first time since her arrival, she turned and gave her sister a spontaneous kiss.

"Your trunks will be up soon, I suppose," said Agatha, an amused twinkle in her eyes; "but don't wait for them. Here are wrapper and slippers at your disposal. I am glad you like the room. You had better take a good rest. Come, girls."

"I'm coming too," cried Mabel. "I must see the rest of your pretty house now."

Margaret's room communicated with Agatha's, and was the cosiest nook in the house. The harmony of colour and arrange-

ment was perfect. Olive-green and sky-blue intermixed and interwove, until the chamber seemed like a mossy dell with the blue air of Italy seen through the interstices. There were numerous pictures on the painted walls, and the ceiling was frescoed with symbols of Margaret, in which the daisy and pearl predominated. As a frieze there was an inscription in old English letters of a sentence taken from one of the Alhambric halls :—

“In this garden of delights I am an eye,
And the pupil thereof is indeed our Lord.”

The tears came to Bethesda's eyes as she looked about and found herself in this pure refuge, where the air was sweet with noble aims. Her sister seemed very much like Saint Margaret to her then.

Mabel was in ecstasies.

“Where did you ever find such ideas?” she exclaimed again and again. “You are really a genius, Agatha. There is not another such room in the universe. How did you ever think of it all? *C'est cela qui m'étonne!* I don't remember any such ideas in New England.”

“It is ten years since I lived there,” said Agatha quietly.

“*Tant pis!*” exclaimed Mabel, striking her forehead with a theatric gesture. “We are ten years older!”

“We will grow old faster if we don't sleep,” said Agatha, somewhat drily. “The girls look very tired.”

“That's true, and I am simply *écrasée*,” said the incorrigible Mabel, letting her arms fall with sudden lassitude. “*Andiamo.*”

As this third language was introduced there was a general laugh.

“What have I done now?” asked Mabel, with wide, innocent eyes. “You are all laughing at me. What have I said so witty?”

“No one would attempt to repeat you,” said Agatha.

It was very warm weather, but a strong wind was blowing, and no one but Mabel minded the heat. Indeed Margaret and Bethesda felt warm days peculiarly luxurious, especially in a house such as this, where every comfort was at hand. Mrs. Trescott, however, complained loudly of “this atrocious American climate, always in extremes, and with heat like a furnace, not——”

“A bath,” as Agatha suggested when a comparison was wanting.

"A bath indeed! Fie! Italy is the most delicious place in the world. The climate never takes you by surprise. If there is to be a change you are prepared gradually, and don't have your ears boxed by these sudden antipodes of heat and cold."

"You have not experienced any such changes yet, have you?" asked Mr. Stanhope courteously, for they were now at dinner, and Mrs. Trescott was in the seat of the honoured guest.

"No," said Mabel, with a quick shrug; "our welcome has been warm in more ways than one."

"You would like it to change?" asked Raleigh, a flash in his keen eyes.

"Oh no! quite on the contrary, I assure you," exclaimed Mabel, covering her *faux pas* with voluminous compliments. "You have greeted us with such delightful cordiality that we could not wish even the weather to change, if that would alter it. But I trust there is no such danger," and she beamed upon him one of her most tropical smiles.

Raleigh bowed with a look of bewilderment which amused his wife and caused her to say:

"We find her almost as difficult to follow as she does the weather, don't we? Would you recognise her, Raleigh? Suppose you met her accidentally, do you think you would immediately call her Mabel?"

"The family resemblance is too strong for it ever to be obliterated," he returned; "but foreign life certainly has changed her."

"Improvement, I hope?" said Mabel coquettishly.

"No doubt," was the prompt reply. "Are not the changes of a fair woman always from good to better?"

"*Ma foi!* You are quite a Frenchman, Raleigh. But I remember you always did have a pretty way of turning things."

When this little tilt was over Mr. Stanhope felt authorised to give some of his attention to Bethesda, who sat at his left, and the manner in which he addressed her was, in spite of intention, more easy and solicitous. There was something touching to the strong, satisfied man in her hungry yet brave eyes. He seemed to look upon her as a frail vessel which a touch might break, and yet which needed support. And she in turn admired him heartily.

The prevailing characteristics of his face were rectitude and warmth of feeling. His mind was active and deep; alive to all the questions of the day, and probing beneath them to the principles that made them good or ill. Philosophy and political economy, finance and social duties, were equally familiar to him. He was one of those men one meets on rare occasions who seem to have every subject chambered in their brains, and each occupant alert. He was punctilious in regard to the observance of conventionalities, and stern, almost rigid, in his opinions on any point of honour or honesty. Otherwise he was very coaxable, and always generous. There were a dozen young men in town whom he had started in individual careers, and who were proud of being called "Mr. Stanhope's young men." A willing hand and a well-trained brain found a faithful friend in Raleigh Stanhope; a shiftless, lazy fellow found sharp words and, up to a certain point, an easy kindliness of heart. But let integrity, in whatever form, be touched, and no man lives who was quicker to unsheathe the sword and deal trenchant blows than Raleigh Stanhope.

The unity which reigned between him and his wife, who could not be divided in thought any more than in deed, was remarkable and complete. The consummate tact and calm audacity with which she treated him were without rival, and her accurate perceptions often aided him through close places, "which," he was fond of saying, "a man without such a wife would have been squeezed to death in."

Now, as they sat on either side of their richly spread table, dispensing hospitality to their guests, entertaining and invigorating them at once, an occupation which seemed peculiarly suitable to both, Bethesda looked from one to the other with unconcealed admiration, and also a sigh, which was immediately smothered.

The conversation turned upon jokes which Mrs. Stanhope was constantly playing on her husband, who took so boyish an enjoyment in them that he would remind her of one story after another to be told at his expense. It was Mrs. Treseott's turn for amazement at this, and she turned astonished eyes from one to the other with a wonder which only added to the fun, as anecdote after anecdote was detailed about this man who was the only person in the world, she asseverated, of whom she was afraid.

When they ended the repast it was in a burst of merriment which made the contrast that followed the more effective. Off from the library was a wire-screened porch, where there were easy chairs and a swinging lamp turned down to a dim lustre. The delicious perfume of tea-roses, with which the garden was filled, came in soft gusts, like the passing of some sweet presence ; the stars shone through the clear air, far away and fine ; a branch over the trellis was blown now and again to touch Bethesda's cheek, and it made her quiver with a thrill of memory too keen for pleasure, yet which she would not move to avoid.

The yearning, the intense longing of her whole being for René then, made it seem as if she could actually see her spirit leaving her, and cleaving the air as it flew swiftly to its bourne. Oh, to be for once, just once, at rest !

"Beth, dear, are you cold ?" asked Margaret, touching her hand. It was burning. "I thought you must be cold, you shivered so," she added simply.

Bethesda roused herself at this, and talked with a deafening uproar in her ears which often made her obliged to strain her hearing to the utmost to be able to understand what persons said.

Presently Agatha excused herself, and a few moments later called Beth.

"There is some wine for you," she said. "Are the perfumes from the garden oppressive ? I see you are not feeling well."

"Oh no ; the roses are delicious. I am only tired, I suppose."

"Come with me, then, a while."

They went into the study, where every draught was caught, and which was only lighted by the reflections of the street lamps. Mrs. Stanhope bade her niece lie down on a bamboo sofa, and then sat and fanned her, talking with gradually lengthening pauses between her words.

Silence at length prevailed. Bethesda's eyes were shut, and her hand rested on her aunt's knee with a clinging confidence. She would like, she was thinking, to be alone with Aunt Agatha and Margaret for a long, long time ;—that is, if she could without hurting any one. Possibly for Aunt Mabel too it would be best ; but, if not, she did not wish to be selfish. This half-hour was hers at least. She could lie here, soothed and rested

by the silence, the sympathy, and an occasional glance at Aunt Agatha's self-contained and chastened face. A willing renunciation, and thence peace, was what spoke so eloquently from these features. What would be her advice if she could see her niece's heart? Bethesda rose presently, restless with encroaching thoughts.

"You are so good to me!" she said fondly, as Agatha rose also to join the others.

"You have liked it?" asked Agatha, bending to kiss her. She always loved persons best when she could do most for them. And Bethesda did not answer except by a touch.

CHAPTER III.

"We have one element that makes fo' peace; and another'h element that makes fo' strhife—; but, my-de'-seh, the peace element is that which ought to make the strhife, and the strhife element is that which ought to be made to keep the peace."—GEO. W. CABLE.

"My-de'-seh, you mus' *crhack* the egg, not smash it."—*Ibid.*

THE next day came the first letter from René. What a rush of conflicting emotions swept through Bethesda's mind at the sight of the familiar writing and crest. Delight, poignant memories, satisfaction, and trembling uncertainty, were all finally engulfed in a deep and sure tenderness.

She took the letter into her own room to read. It was written while he was still in Liverpool, and when he was in the full surge of a passionate grief which swept him off his feet. To the woman, struggling for pure light, for equipoise, and stainless chastity, it was inexpressibly painful. Alas! that this should be the letter written when he was most vividly under her influence!

Mabel had heard that Beth had received a foreign letter, and came in to see it. Her face was accusing and obdurate. Nothing, Bethesda knew by experience, could possibly please her then. But of course the letter, the showable letter, had to be given her; and Bethesda did not conceal that there was one enclosed. The whole affair made Mabel excessively angry. She had been duped and cheated, and there was no way in which she could indemnify herself. She could not break off

the correspondence, because it was already broken, and before the time came for resuming it Bethesda would be of age and independent. She tried to get the girl to say she would not read any of the letters from René that came before his answer to her steamer letter; but all requests on this head were steadily refused.

Still, René had taken his strongest advocate away in robbing himself of Bethesda's approval. The torrent of anger and abused feeling, which Mabel gave more force by somewhat striving to control, found the dykes of Bethesda's precious land already partially undermined. But she made a loyal defence, and worked hard to draw the tide towards her own delinquencies—where the land was less precious—instead of René's. She was not very successful. Had not Mabel reared Bethesda from her cradle? Did she not know every tendency of the girl, as though her soul had been crystal? Was it any education of *hers* that had fostered concealment and deceit? Had she not always been frank as the day herself, and brought up Beth to revere frankness? She scorned the idea that her niece, her darling, had been most to blame in this unworthy affair! She had been tempted, been beguiled in the Eden of her innocence, and René, whom she, the too fond Mabel, had trusted, was the odious serpent! Well, not quite that, perhaps. Some sense of fairness still slumbering under the tumultuous swervings of her nature turned uneasily in its sleep, and she smoothed the pillows by granting that it might be he was an Adam—the wicked Adam! who at all costs must be driven out of the heaven of her niece's heart.

When Bethesda emerged from that conversation she looked exhausted to an alarming degree. Margaret felt a smouldering fire of resentment against Mrs. Trescott for treating Beth in such a manner when she was already miserable in health; but she said nothing.

Agatha, as usual, acted. She drew Beth down on the lounge, ordered some iced wine, and then, when the two girls were sipping and talking easily, she slipped away for a moment, and was gone an hour in Mrs. Trescott's room.

But Mabel was not amenable to reason or prudence. She hated that word! she *must* be frank; she would be frank with Beth if it cost her her life, or any one's! Then, less excitedly, but with a great air of determination, she told her sister that

this matter, that Beth, must be left absolutely to her. She would brook no interference in an affair of which she alone knew the importance, and which she alone could manage. She knew what she was doing, and she knew, *Dieu sait!* what she had failed to do. She was not going to make that mistake again.

"It is possible," here said Agatha, "that you are trying to repair past errors by a greater one now——"

"That only proves how little you know about it," interrupted Mabel.

"I know this, at least: Beth is not strong enough to endure what she is now undergoing, and yet she has a character which will not yield to importunity. Between the two her body will be mangled."

"There are some things of more value than health or life even. And as to importunity, didn't Christ himself say that we should even importune God when we wished what was right?"

"He certainly in no place told us to coerce others to do as we thought right. That is a doctrine which made the Inquisition. Look to it, Mabel, that you do not work more harm than good. If it is a question of honour, as I judge from your words—wait a minute, please; let me finish—remember that there are three thousand miles between her and Europe. Moreover, if you are afraid they will be crossed, leave Beth with Raleigh and me. I will warrant you no one can harm her then!"

"No," exclaimed Mabel quickly; "no one can do anything for her but I myself. It isn't enemies without but enemies within that I fear. And yet there is not a thought of harm in her! She is deceived! deceived! I must and will protect her. You know nothing about it; you must leave me alone."

"She is like her mother," said Agatha. "You may convince her, or you may kill her; you never can force her. And she is not in a physical condition to bear argument now. Can't you see that she is worn out, just ready to be ill? If you compel her to endure such scenes as this she has had to-day you must be prepared for disastrous consequences. If you temporise you may help both body and mind."

"Temporise!" cried Mabel, starting up almost with a shriek; "temporising has been a poisoned dagger to her! Every instant it remains in her flesh it becomes more dangerous! It *shall* be pulled out! Doesn't the Bible say: 'It is better to

go into heaven maimed than with two hands to be cast into hell-fire?' I tell you, you know nothing about it. And yet she is as pure as an angel!"

Agatha saw the worse than uselessness of more words, and left her. She was amazed, even astounded, at the condition of her sister, and with every word that had been spoken she had realised more the imperative need of Beth's being separated from Mabel for a while. But how could it be accomplished? Mabel, she perceived, was extremely jealous, and would allow no one to exert any influence counteractive to her own. It would be impossible to overcome this Agatha clearly saw. The next best thing would be for them to be altogether, where she could screen Beth somewhat; and, indeed, as she had long since planned, on grounds of pleasure alone.

The household was not so congenial, with Mabel fretting against the heat and laying Bethesda's tired appearance all to that, for plans to be long delayed.

"I don't see why we shouldn't go to-morrow," exclaimed Mabel. "It is blistering here."

"Where do you think of going?"

"Oh, I don't know. There are plenty of places. The Catskills, the Alleghanies, the White Mountains."

"How would you like the Rocky Mountains? It will be something new to you both, and it is well worth seeing. Raleigh and I are expecting to go in a short time now."

"Oh, you couldn't induce me! I abhor the west. The east may be endurable; I am sure I hope so; but deliver me from this rough, ugly western life! And it must be a great deal worse out so far."

Agatha quietly explained the advantages and pleasures of Colorado,—the grand scenery, and curiosity of pioneer civilisation. She also remarked that the dry air there would probably invigorate Beth as nothing else could do. It would be a complete change for her, and would benefit Margaret as well. They could make a pleasant family party if they all liked it.

"Of course it would be charming for us all to be together," said Mabel; "but," conclusively, "you see I hate the west. Why don't you come with us? There is fishing and hunting east, no doubt."

"Raleigh has found that there is none worth seeking," interposed Agatha, studying her sister keenly.

"Well," exclaimed Mabel, with a toss of her head, "I don't know why we should all go where it will best suit one man. It hasn't been my habit to let others dictate my actions, and, for my part, I had rather be alone than not go east."

"You certainly have a great love of places," remarked Agatha, with controlled satire. "But how about the health question? Physicians have told me repeatedly that it would be excellent for Margaret, and probably it would be the best thing to be done for Beth."

"Oh, they are not in the least alike. I have heard, too, that rare air is very dangerous for heart troubles. I don't think it would be right at all to risk it. I never would consent to it."

She seemed to consider the matter quite settled by this, but Agatha had no thought of yielding to so flimsy a reason.

"Have her heart examined and leave it to the physician," she said, a trifle shortly.

"She never would consent to that, and if she did, I have no confidence in physicians. They are miserably ignorant."

"It is possible, however, that they may know more than we, since they devote their lives to the study of medicine," replied Agatha, and let the subject drop.

Later she called Bethesda aside and asked her if she would object to having her heart examined. Beth shrank from it, and Agatha explained her reasons.

"Oh, if you think Margaret needs Colorado, let us go without minding me," said Bethesda eagerly.

"I think it would be as good for you as for Margaret if your heart is sound; but, dear, I don't wish you to run any risk."

"I confess I would rather not know the state of my heart," said Bethesda at last.

"Why not?"

"Because—well, it has troubled me some of late, and——"

"That is sufficient reason in itself, then, why you should have it examined. Be reasonable, dear. I could always appeal with confidence to your reason when you were a child. If you think about it calmly you will see that you should have all the light you can. It is never well to hide our eyes for fear of what we may see, nor did it ever use to be your way."

Bethesda was "reasonable," and an hour later—Mrs. Stan-

hope was always expeditious—a physician somewhat celebrated for his treatment of heart troubles appeared. He inquired minutely into Miss Hamilton's heredity, looked grave on hearing of the circumstances of her mother's death, made his examination, and studied on the case.

Mrs. Stanhope took him into the next room to hear his opinion, and Bethesda was left palpitating more with hope than fear. Heart disease! that would mean that any sudden shock or long strain would kill her. Life need not be prolonged beyond the loss of hope and love. In case of the worst, death would relieve her.

They returned.

"Have I heart disease?" asked Bethesda, looking up in the physician's face with a peculiarly bright smile. It was as if she had asked: Can I really be happy soon?

He stood and looked down at her half a minute before he answered.

"No," he said then slowly, and he saw her face fall. "No, you have not heart disease, but you have a functional disorder which will terminate in organic trouble if you are not extremely careful. You know neither one nor the other means death. You should understand clearly that heart disease means suffering much more frequently than it does death. If you are like your aunt here, that will make it more emphatic to you when I say you must avoid all strong emotions and all excitement. You must lead a lazy life, think little, take tonics, and live in the open air. If you do this you will perhaps escape the disease."

She glanced at him, and away, with an incredulous smile trembling around her sad lips. To tell her she must avoid emotion, excitement, thought, and in her present circumstances! He read her better than she guessed, however, and he appreciated the hopelessness of that smile.

"And you said about Colorado?" suggested Mrs. Stanhope.

"She had better try no experiments. It might help and might injure her; I would not undertake to say which. I should advise her going to the seashore, or not very high among the White Mountains."

He turned to bow profoundly as he bade them good-morning, and gave another keen glance at his patient. She interested him as a curiosity. The fortitude and mobility that mingled in her face indicated how foolish his advice must seem to her.

He knew it was foolish too, and yet it was true. Probably if he ever saw her again, it would be in the clutches of an incurable agony.

So Mrs. Trescott had it her own way. Mrs. Stanhope was seriously concerned for Beth, but did not see her way to doing anything for her at present. It was hard for her to be inactive, and to this was added the shock of finding Mabel insensible to old ties, when her own heart had ached for the far-away sister, her nearest relative. Domestic love made the very warp of her nature, and each thread had to be pulled out with persistent effort before she could or would relinquish the band of rich colour each loved person wove into her life. She had not now the slightest intention of giving up her sister, but would patiently wait and work—waiting always meant working with her—to the end of a complete recovery.

Mabel herself was much shocked in discovering Beth's critical condition. Mrs. Stanhope told her quite plainly, not sparing the details and prognosis. She wished to impress Mabel with the necessity of avoiding these exciting discussions, and Mabel was quite sufficiently impressed, for the time at least. She went to Beth, and put her arms about her, and begged her to take care of herself, to spare herself these wearing questions, to put them all away by simply agreeing to the year's silence, and then waiting until she was stronger before she thought them out. But when she found Bethesda unshaken in her resolution to guide her own soul, to do as she thought right, come what might, then Mabel asked herself how *she* was to do anything when Beth would not consent? How could she shield her niece from bodily terrors when her soul was in the clutches of evil, and she alone could loosen the grasp?

They remained in S—— but a few days longer, and then went over the long dusty road east again. It was a silly thing, in Mabel's opinion, their ever having gone west. Business could have been attended to some other time just as well, and this was an unnecessary expense and fatigue. As to pleasure, what pleasure could there be in going back and forth over this rough railroad, through the scorching land?

Margaret was silent when such things were said, and Bethesda was too weary to argue, nor would it have done any good if she had. To fight with a windmill was nothing to fighting with Mrs. Trescott's variable opinions.

Moreover, Bethesda's whole strength was strained in solving the questions daily, hourly, thrust in on her attention. It was an appalling change that had come to her. The complete difference in mental and moral atmosphere between the old world and the new, altered every glimpse of every fact that Bethesda saw. Her position was changed, and her past and present and future had all fallen into chaos together. If the central point of the universe were suddenly removed to its outer circumference, the stars and planets would not fly more wildly through space than did the shattered thoughts of Bethesda's mental system.

Mrs. Trescott also felt it, and the confusion it engendered was proved by her saying to Beth once :

"I believe you never could have endured this coming to America and its influences if I had not known. You would have had brain fever ; there is no doubt of it."

"I do not think so," said Bethesda ; nor did she at any time. Her aunt's knowledge of the affair only thwarted and exhausted her ; more within even than without. Had Mrs. Trescott not known more than when René left them, it doubtless would have been hard,—the struggle, the awakening, would inevitably have come,—but it would have been less hard for Bethesda than now, when she felt her aunt's incessant pushing weight behind her, and the watching that made each throe observed, and computed as so much done or undone. She sometimes felt it to be absolutely unbearable, and she would have given the world for a little privacy, for an instant blank of scrutinising eyes. To be alone at times is a vital necessity to those in great trouble. There are sacred moments when the dearest cannot intrude without causing pain, and they often are the hours of travail when the priceless gift of peace is born.

So Bethesda, with the instinct of self-preservation, avoided being alone with her aunt, and this was easier to do since Margaret accompanied them for their summer east, and the sisters of course were almost constantly together. Margaret was taking now the undisputed place of a loved child to Bethesda. She was really the elder, and yet Beth was always the one to be addressed as Miss Hamilton, and given, without hesitation, the position of eldest.

There was an innocence and simplicity about Margaret which was essentially childlike, and her *petite* figure and extreme fairness aided the appearance of youth. Her hair was like a tangle

of sunbeams, not golden, but recalling the morning light while the shadows are yet long: her delicately-finished eyebrows arched over "myrtle-eyes," as Bethesda called them, which were capable of much passion, as well as a steely glitter when displeased. Generally, however, she was gentle and sweet. She reminded one, indeed, of a virgin by Raphael, and possessed the mystic devotion and absorption in higher things which, combined with purity, may have been the traits of Mary.

She clung to Bethesda as to one for whom alone life was worth living, and yet held her in a large enough embrace for her to be able to turn freely in it: even to turn away at times, and yet, upon return, to find the same warm light in the tender eyes. But this capacity for devotion only balanced an inevitability of judgment which might otherwise have been stern, perhaps merciless. Had any one done wrong, whether Margaret loved much or little, the love she had given would swiftly return into her own bosom, although it might force life out in the process. An absolute incapacity for worshipping a fallen idol made her look upon another who did so with nothing more pitiful than a stare of amazement. Yet if one did wrong, and repented in act, her forgiveness would be full and obliterating, and one would have considered the effort made to obtain it well spent. She would help, she would try to help, neither one nor the other of these instincts. Her whole character was so built on this fatality of cause and effect that to conceive anything else in herself was impossible,—more, indifferent to her. Worth and love went together with her; reciprocation would have been of little consequence, so that her ideal remained intact. That fallen, and the pride which was inherent in her would have lifted her above all possibility of kneeling in the dust to pick up and piece together the fragments, and fancy it was as perfect as before. A dent in the sword of life was always a dent to her; there was no compromise or illusion about that; but it might be rendered ignoble or glorious as defeat or victory followed. If defeat, the sword was broken, and useless to her; if victory, she would have been capable of sheathing it in her own heart, could such a deed protect it from injury.

And this was the woman who now nestled close to Bethesda's side, and encompassed her with an unobtrusive tenderness. Her unsuspecting exterior and intelligent confidence tranquilised Bethesda unspeakably, and she felt a great gratitude

growing in her heart which made her little sister hourly more precious.

The three left New York for the White Mountains on a shady afternoon in midsummer. As the hills appeared, and seemed to increase in height, they were seen through a shimmer of opal, that rendered their blue tints soft and ethereal.

Mabel was in raptures.

"Just to be east again is a joy to me! And look at those hills; why, one could almost fancy we were going to see the Italian lakes! Alas! for *la bella Italia*!"

"It is hardly like Italy," said Bethesda. "One never sees the violets, purples, and amethystine shades in America. Here it is a deep, true, perfect blue. It is like a clarion note that never changes into any other, but only grows surer and fuller as it increases."

"You speak as if you liked it better," said Margaret. She herself longed for Italy.

"No, not better," answered Bethesda slowly. "There is something steadfast and reliant about it, but the tenderness and loveliness of Italy does not belong to us. Browning would call this, I suppose, a masculine land, and Italy feminine. I think Mrs. Randleth described the difference better, when she said that Italy was like a lover and England like a husband."

"What queer fancies that woman had!" exclaimed Mabel.

"Poetic ones, I should say," returned Margaret, with interest. "Tell me more about her."

"If you once get Beth on that subject, you will never get her off!" said Mabel. "I'll leave!"

In spite of this remark, and perhaps because of Mrs. Trescott's move to the other side of the car, and her novel, Margaret succeeded in leading Bethesda into a frank description of her friend, and, almost before she was aware, Beth found herself talking with ease of all her friends, and frequently mentioning M. d'Isten.

"What is he like?" asked Margaret at last. "You have spoken very little of him, yet he was quite intimate apparently."

"Yes, he was a warm friend of both auntie's and mine," replied Bethesda, commanding her voice.

"Aunt Mabel does not speak of him much."

"No; they had a misunderstanding just at the last, but I hope it will be satisfactorily explained."

"You like him very much, then?"

"I admire him, and honour him," replied Bethesda, with a proud steadiness.

"Tell me about him; what kind of a man is he?" said Margaret simply, and Bethesda chose tempered words, and wandered back through the flowery fields of her life before the *dénouement*, hand-in-hand with this pure-hearted sister.

It has been told us by a man who knew the human soul marvellously well, that to remember happiness in grief is our greatest misery, but there do come hours when what made the past radiant is lost for ever, and yet its remembrance is our sole light; as, when the sun is set, its reflection on the moon is all that relieves us from black darkness. Bethesda found herself in this moonlit land to-day, and it was a sweet, fine pleasure to her. It seemed to lift the stigma of confusion and possible dishonour off from her soul, in returning thus to those surely innocent hours in Florence, in their dear Italy.

As she talked, the sunset tinged rosily the mist which still lingered in the atmosphere, gathering and dissolving in ever-varied forms and colours. The wooded slopes, the towering crags, the lofty peaks, were all suffused by this transparent blush, which came and went with a shy waywardness, of itself indescribably lovely. On every side soft clouds clung with white arms to the stalwart necks of the rocks, or lay trembling on the bosom of the hills. Little streams rushed down impetuously to mingle with the calmer river, while above arched the heavens, luminous with amber and gold, amidst which shone a brighter point, the evening star.

The dreamy monologue melted into this landscape and became a part of it, as silence fell at last. Margaret was impressed with she knew not what unselfish sadness, and Bethesda felt refreshed and sweetened by the aspect of these everlasting hills clad in the colours of love and truth.

CHAPTER IV.

“Growth is the condition of love, as it is of life.”

“In things evil there is a soul of goodness, and reformation consists, not in annihilating the evil thing, but in developing that soul of goodness within it, which gives it life and vigour, and in directing it to the good which it erringly seeks.”—SIMPSON'S *Philosophy of Shakespeare's Sonnets*.

THE summer passed in alternations of conflict, victory, and despair. Every letter of René's, written before he could receive hers, marked an era; for Bethesda's was one of those natures “whose roots strike deep, clear their own way, and win the light by growing.” She was not a person who could rest with an unsolved doubt, implying wrong action, in her mind. It was an ever-present goad to her; it pricked her on to indefatigable thought and ceaseless searching. Sometimes she tottered under the weight she carried, and yearned for some sure support until she thought her soul would die for the want of it. There must be something outside and beyond herself, or René, or her aunt, or any one, and this must be—what else could it be?—the right.

And then a vivid remembrance would come to her of how on shipboard René had said, with long pauses between each phrase, and a strange foresight in his eyes:

“My Esda will trust me always; if I am old,—or ugly,—or ill,—or unhappy,—or wicked——”

“No,” she had interrupted, “not that.”

“Not that, then,” he repeated, yet hardly seeming to notice the interruption, “or poor,—or cross,—or distant,—she will always, always trust me.”

Later, he had said that it hurt him at first to think she would not trust herself to him were he wicked, that her affection would not be inalienable under no matter what circumstances; but now he knew she was right; he must be always worthy.

“Otherwise you would not be yourself,” she had said. “You would not be the noble René I have known, and I could not transfer my confidence from the real You to that unknown one.”

The same, she thought now, would apply to herself. They

would each be worthy, no matter what the cost. She must not desert him a moment. If she were unsatisfied, she must think what she would have him do, so as to be able to adequately help him when the time came.

Presently this earnest thought brought its sure result. The blindness fell from her eyes as a veil that is dropped. One thing was settled: René must belong all to Louise. Bethesda could only claim him, or write to him as a friend, or as a co-labourer. Nothing more could be thought of. This was one rock under her feet.

And it remained a solid rock in spite of the wild waves of passion which surged over her at night, when she felt the presence of René near her, and in trouble. She would have given a whole life of happiness for the power to annihilate time and space, and comfort him then. But the doubly-woven curtain hung stiff between him and her, and she could only beat herself against the unyielding folds with impotent despair.

Then there came the consoling thought that the answer to her letter was yet to come. He would show himself strong in that, and support her. And finally one rainy day, suddenly illumined, it came! The last!——

It was very long; in fact a diary, as Bethesda had expected. Perhaps in other things her suppositions as to what its contents would be had not been wrong; but still it threw her on to her own feet as nothing else had done.

She saw that she could not depend on him to help her; all the strength of denial must come from her; all the earnest seeking and truth-compelling thought. He would follow where she led; this was the utmost she could expect of him now. They could no longer judge each by the other. There was one side of her nature to which she must recognise that he did not respond. Where was it, she asked herself quickly, that she did not answer him?

However, the writing under the same dates in their journals proved their difference. On one day she wrote that she must do her utmost to reinstate him in his highest self-esteem; while he, far from his self-esteem having been lowered by their intercourse, wrote:—"Thy glance ennobles me. Thou personifiest my duty, my honour, my conscience, and something even more than these. Thou raisest me above myself. If thou shouldst abandon me, what would I become?"

When she felt an icy hand on her heart in seeing the first effect of her letter was dead silence, his heart was burning within him, and he cried : "There is no law, no distance, no malignity capable of sundering us !"

What gave her confidence in being able to help him to see the right and do it were such sentences as these : "If I leave thee, it would be replacing joy by suffering ; I acknowledge I have not the courage except as thou desirest it." And again : "I resign myself to my fate, whatsoever it may be, if Bethesda imposes it upon me. Any other hand I defy !"

She must go alone from the seductive waves, must set her feet firmly on the shore, and thence help him. She would save him if he were passive, which she had confidence he would be. Perhaps, later, he might even help her. She took up the double burden without regret, but with a yearning patience, and a loneliness she had never felt so deeply before. But she was resolute. It should be her life's work to win him to the sight of truth and duty. Through her he had fallen ; if through her he could gain a higher standpoint, by force of having met and conquered a great temptation, she would feel her life well spent. If he failed ?—She could never forgive herself.

In the evening of the day the letter came, parts of which Bethesda had read to her aunt, through which she learned that her request had been refused, Mrs. Trescott appeared in a black dress, unrelieved by any colour, and took occasion to say to Beth :

"This is the death ; there only remains now the funeral."

Bethesda drew herself up proudly, with a flash of disdain for her only reply. In pushing him off thus cruelly Mabel had but thrust him closer to Bethesda, and :

"I shall not desert him," she told herself.

"Come into my room," said Mrs. Trescott sharply, maddened by that expression on her niece's face. "I see you approve of that cowardly, sneaking letter !" she burst out, as soon as the door was closed ; but Bethesda shut down the flood-gates right there, standing regally in the centre of the apartment.

"Aunt Mabel," she said, "I shall not listen to invectives against any one ; certainly not against René. If you have nothing else to say, I shall ask you to excuse me."

"Oh, it's very fine for you to be so proud with *me* ! But sit down ; I must talk to you. Don't you see, *can't* you see,

that René hasn't one impulse of veracity, not one moment of remorse for having spoiled your life——"

"He has not spoiled it."

"I say he *has*! Every one notices it—notices how much you are changed; I notice it more than all. You don't care for me a quarter, no, not a tenth part as much as you did, and it is all because of René; while I lie awake nights, and tire myself to death to think out an escape from the dangers around your path."

"I am sorry."

Mabel came and knelt down beside Bethesda, and put her arms around the girl's waist.

"Darling," she pleaded, "you are being worn out with this struggle, and a gulf is widening between you and me. I can't bear it. I would be so glad to suffer all for you, but I cannot. You will not even let yourself be guided by me. I want to help you more than you can know. I don't feel as if I could meet your mother in heaven with this load upon my soul——"

"It is no fault of yours," exclaimed Beth.

"Yes, it is; partially at least. I should not have trusted either of you. I ought to have known that I could see clearer than you. I ought to have had more confidence in myself. I have helped to undo you, and I have now a duty I owe to myself to reinstate you. Think of me a little, Beth. Don't let all your sympathy go out towards him; *I* am suffering too."

"Dear auntie!" murmured Bethesda. But her position was now unendurable. She loosened her aunt's clasp, and rose and walked away. If only she could answer, alone, for her own soul! No one could take that responsibility from her in any case, and it would be so much easier if she could but fight it out her own way.

But for Mabel Trescott, with her imperial love of domination, it was simply impossible for her to leave her niece free. It was said of Thomas Jefferson that "he loved his country, and would have died to save it; that is, to convert it permanently to his way of thinking." A better description could not be given of Mabel Trescott at this time. If Beth would only lie passive in her hands, and let her present and future be determined for her, by one who considered her own judgment absolutely correct, Mabel thought she could have died content. But, as it was, an impassable gulf seemed to yawn wider and wider between them, a sight which made the woman, jealous of both affection

and power, frantic in her efforts to have it close. But her endeavours were all in the wrong direction; nothing but the sacrifice of self could effect it, and this was something of which she had never thought.

A day or two after this a long rain set in; the house was empty and bleak, and Mrs. Trescott tired of her inactivity, so she decided to go to New York immediately. It had been already agreed upon that this should be their future residence, the girls acquiescing in what their aunt urged, as any city, except S——, was indifferent to them. So they left the mountains, and Bethesda found herself, one late September day, in the port whence steamers sailed direct for France, and the monotonous billows were all that divided him from her.—All? There was a distance far more insuperable than any space which now separated them, and she was beginning to know it.

Early in November they were well settled in their new home, and friends were finding them out, and were *empressis* in their attentions. But no one of the three found the society altogether congenial. Mrs. Trescott was very critical. Every one was too “shoppy,” and busied about matters in which she could take no interest, to please her taste. Persons who were merry and promised “a good time,” however, were vigorously cultivated, so that she soon became the centre of a circle of boisterous young people who made her laugh, but could give her no more substantial food; and this was not of a quality to satisfy any woman of thirty-five.

Margaret often found herself longing for the cultured and earnest persons who surrounded Mrs. Stanhope; a suggestive company which gave one thoughts that remained long after the echo of voices had ceased. It would take years before she and Bethesda could collect about them those who would be of a class at all similar to the friends of fifteen years’ standing, who gathered to Aunt Agatha as their lamp of wisdom. Indeed, not being of a buoyant disposition, she thought the possibility hopeless of achievement.

Bethesda meantime was in too listless an outward state, and of too concentrated an excitement within, to care much what went on about her. Trouble often makes persons selfish, and this Bethesda undeniably was during these autumn months. She had, it may be, considerable excuse, but selfishness is a fault which can never be excused. She tried to take her part in the duties

of the house, aiding Margaret in the housekeeping, which Mabel did not care to assume ; and to her sister at least she was always tender. But she was careless of her physical welfare, and was so wrapped in the clouds of smoke that constantly ascended from the battlefield, where she fought day and night, that she saw little of what was going on outside.

Her increasing weakness, pallor, and disability caused her sister great distress, and Mrs. Trescott but little less. Finally Margaret wrote to Aunt Agatha desperately, and with promptitude Mrs. Stanhope telegraphed and wrote for Bethesda to come to her, alone. She was not one to let a creature fade away without vigorous trial of various methods of cure.

Bethesda went, but reluctantly. Her body was so heavy now, and her mind so full, that she would have preferred remaining still to any change, however agreeable. Mrs. Stanhope had, however, understood how to so express her loneliness without Margaret, and her desire to visit with Beth, that, encouraged by Margaret, she finally yielded ; and the middle of November, accompanied only by Marcot, found her received with the tenderest cordiality in S——.

"This is the recruiting station," said Mr. Stanhope gaily, offering her his arm to escort her to breakfast. "I think my wife would be perfectly happy if she had the control of a hospital, and a limitless purse to do what she chose for them. You couldn't have relieved her loneliness, nor filled her heart better than by coming here to be coaxed into health ;—and you know what a gratification it will be to us all when she succeeds."

"Thank you," murmured Bethesda. She felt almost guilty under this solicitous affection ; for, did she wish to recover ?

The change in her since the summer affected both Mr. and Mrs. Stanhope powerfully. He found himself speculating upon the features, thin with conflict, and rigorous at times with self-control, and felt when the evening was over as if some far-away heroine had been telling him the incidents of her daily life and listening with courteous attention to his remarks, while really living only in the tragedy which made her for ever memorable.

Mrs. Stanhope devoted the first week to close, if unobtrusive study of her patient, doing a hundred things for her restoration meanwhile, from *massage* to providing a table so daintily nourishing that it was, as Raleigh quoted one day, "As if Juno had been sick, and she her dieter."

Mentally she gave her no less stimulating food. Early in her visit she put into the girl's hands Goethe's *Elective Affinities*.

"See what you can make out of it," she said. "Many persons consider it immoral, and yet Goethe asserted that it was the only book he ever wrote with a deliberate moral aim."

Bethesda was soon absorbed in it, finding it marvellously suited to her needs. A thousand questions were suggested, which Aunt Agatha helped her to elucidate by a clear reasoning unobscured by prejudice, and which constantly led one from the small fact to the large principle; from the particular instance to the universal truth.

The lesson Bethesda learned was very definite and clear. It was, perhaps, what each one has to learn by experience sometime during life: that only in obedience to law is true freedom. Within certain limits we are free; overstep those limits and we are inexorably bound on every side. If we choose what is right and good we have all truth to expand in; if we prefer evil we have to take it with being constantly closer and closer bound. Order is the foundation of the universe; try to destroy that order and we injure ourselves without in the least altering circumstances. Law is unchangeable and absolute; we but dash ourselves to death in trying to shape it to the form of our desires.

Thus awakened the sense of the "majesty of virtue" in Bethesda Hamilton's mind.

CHAPTER V.

"This mount is such that ever
At the beginning down below 'tis tiresome,
And aye the more one climbs the less it hurts."

Purgatorio.

Love and immortality are twin thoughts of life.

It was on the evening that she had finished this book, and was still under its arousing influence, that a Mr. Blythe called. He had been a friend of Margaret's, and still frequented Mrs. Stanhope's parlours, round which the scent of the rose seemed to linger. He was shy of Bethesda, however, and she found her best method of enjoying the thoughts he brought was in keeping herself as unobtrusive as possible while he and Mrs. Stan-

hope talked together on subjects which she was glad to hear discussed. In fact Mrs. Stanhope probably led the conversation to these subjects, for she believed in climatic influences on thought as on nature.

There were some elections taking place, in which, as usual, Mrs. Stanhope was interested.

"Coke upholds that a statesman should practise expediency, I believe," she said, in answer to some rather sceptical remark of Mr. Blythe's. "God, indeed, acts so towards us, but he always gives us real truth as far as we are able to accept it."

"Well, I don't know," replied Mr. Blythe; "it seems to me I could endure a good deal more than I receive."

"I think it often *seems* so to us all. Beth was telling me to-day that Dante, in his *Purgatory*, makes the power to ascend to heaven simultaneous with the will to do so; but this powerful desire, which is at one with our whole will, only comes after long striving. So the greater your desire is to receive a revelation, the more must you patiently labour for it."

"But how can I labour for a thing I don't believe exists? That is where I am in regard to religious truth. I must grasp it, and hold it, and feel it *there*, before I begin to labour to gain it as my own. I cannot accept a thing on faith; it must be demonstrated to me, and it seems to me if it cannot be demonstrated its inability is a proof against it."

"So it would be. But you are looking for a physical proof of a spiritual fact. How can you prove to my senses that you think?"

"By speech."

"Then anything you don't speak I can assert you do not think? But let that pass. You cannot see with your eyes, nor feel with your hand, your intellect, and yet you would acknowledge it was as much, if not more, *you* as your cranium. You cannot prove that you love, but cannot you believe in an unmanifested affection?" Mr. Blythe moved uneasily, for such had been his feeling for Margaret. "You cannot prove your own individuality, and yet it is just that which is *you*, is your true self. Your body is merely a manifestation of you, as heat is of fire, as the spark is of electricity. We must not cramp ourselves into sense proof alone; we must progress beyond that, and in each advancing stage we will find we have wider limits and more soul room."

"That sounds true," said Mr. Blythe slowly, while Bethesda glanced from one to the other in eager interest.

Just then there was ushered in another caller, a young clergyman, who was peculiarly alive to the needs of the time, and ready to flow with the current of new ideas, so that he might find their truth and controvert their error. Mrs. Stanhope immediately introduced him to the subject they had been discussing, and he entered into it with readiness.

"You should read Hegel," he said to Mr. Blythe, smiling. "I call him the fifth gospel. For any one who understands him he is simply salvation. If you once understand the meaning of history, the use of epochs, the reason of law, you see God in everything. It is all in the Bible; only few read it there. Such men as Hegel are expounders, almost new revelations."

"Do you suppose we ever will be given a new revelation?" asked Bethesda suddenly.

"I certainly do," said Mrs. Stanhope emphatically.

"Ah! do you, indeed?" remarked Mr. Connough, surprised. "I would not have expected that of you, Mrs. Stanhope."

"I am sure I see no reason against it. I should be sorry to think that humanity had all the truth it ever would or could receive."

"You are right!" exclaimed Mr. Blythe, his face irradiating; "you are really sensible!"

"Excuse me, but I don't see that," returned Mr. Connough. "Christ manifested to us the perfection of humanity, and the realisation of divinity. He showed us God as a person, and there can be nothing higher than the manifestation of the Absolute. If a person asks for something higher than this it is as if he innocently inquired, 'What is there beside the whole?'"

"Yet," said Mrs. Stanhope, "each nation has believed that its religion was the 'whole,' and in spite of this it has been transcended. Why may not the future transcend Christ?"

"Your question refers to the condition of religions before Christ came. They were constantly transcending one another because they had not yet reached the reconciliation. Christ was the first infinite, and the first is the last. Each religion before that grew beyond and beyond; since Christ it is growing *into* itself. Christ taught us how the finite can grow into the infinite; how the individual can become universal. What can there be beyond?"

"But," said Mr. Blythe, "there was Buddha; wherein did he differ from Christ? Where was he so inferior? He taught his people self-sacrifice and morality, and that is what Christ taught *after* Buddha."

"Christ never taught self-sacrifice as an end, only a means. He taught us to sacrifice our lower selves to our higher selves; our higher selves to our highest self. For every death he taught a resurrection. Buddha taught: Do good that ye may cease to exist. Christ taught: Do good that ye may have everlasting life. The ultimatum of Buddhism is self-extinction; the ultimatum of Christianity is self-realisation, as Christ showed us. In him we have the infinite grown out of the finite; the absolute 'being' out of the limited 'becoming.' In him we see what humanity can be, what it is potentially, as, therefore, what it must be in its final development."

"And you find this all in Hegel?" asked Mr. Stanhope.

"It is all there and in the Bible. Every man who teaches the truth is a disciple of Christ's. He must be; he cannot help himself if he would. History shows us that great ages blossom forth into great men. One man sums up the meaning of his time, and catches the light of the future on his uplifted face. The world is like a great century plant: it grows slowly from joint to joint, and then holds up a glorious flower to the admiration of mankind. Presently that withers, but the century plant progresses, and its second blossom is higher than the first. Hegel tells you how the natural is the first blossom. Experience alone satisfies us. Then comes the artistic. Greece and the Renaissance make the cycle of art, which is higher than nature; it is nearer the reality in its symbolism. But we have passed beyond that to the moral cycle, which began with the Reformation, and which is going through the strict analysis of science in the present. It is the fashion of our time to see infidelity everywhere, for it to be everywhere; but do you think for this that the world is really growing worse? Do you suppose God thinks it is suddenly rolling backwards? No, indeed! Where we see decay, God sees growth. Growth it is, though the apple may fall with a shock that causes an earthquake, though its decay may poison thousands. The seed will sprout, will push itself steadily up through the dark ground for a while, but at last it will raise itself in the light of heaven, and we will see its beauty and call it good."

"Then you think," said Mr. Stanhope, "that all this atheism and confusion of morals will result in something better than what went before it? For my part I think the good old times of our fathers were best."

"It is because you have not looked into the question sufficiently deeply," said Mr. Connough with earnestness. "By this minute analysis, this destruction of all life, because only a *dead* body can be dissected, the dross of human additions and complications of Christ's life will be cleared away. Then, when nothing remains in our hands or minds but the dead fragments of material which formed the home of a soul, we shall recognise that there is something beyond the reach of the scalpel, and we shall take truer means to find out what it is which influences the molecules of the brain, and causes consciousness, or what we call soul. The powerful tendency of the present, Mr. Stanhope, is only a counteraction to the powerful tendency of the past. What was then resistless in its effort to suffocate reason by floods of blind faith, is now washing faith away in the undertow of a receding tide that leaves thirsty science staring blankly at the sky. Presently we shall find that 'moving equilibrium' which Herbert Spencer calls synonymous with perfection."

"As I understand you, then," said Mrs. Stanhope, "you would term this scientific investigation of spiritual truth a kind of mental Crusade, and one which will meet with the same result: thousands of lost lives to buy an empty tomb."

"Precisely! The Crusaders only repeated what the disciples did when they went to the sepulchre, and Christ rebuked them with the words: 'Why seek ye the living among the dead?' It is what the scientists are doing to-day."

"Art saved the Crusaders, I believe," returned Mrs. Stanhope; "that is, they began to seek, not the tomb, but some more spiritual symbol of divinity. Now, what is it that will save us?"

"Not art in any case. We are not satisfied with that limited view. Our ideals of Christ transcend all conceptions ever worked into canvas or marble. Holman Hunt and Doré may try their realistic pictures; they will not answer our needs. Even in art we need something more complex. Modern life is complex; a lyre of three strings will not serve us. I myself think the novel is the art of the future. It does not circumscribe, it is suggestive of outlines rather than outlining. It is soul-painting, spirit sculpture. No; philosophical insight is, I

should say, the answer to your question, Mrs. Stanhope. But we must carry up with us the different phases of our religious beliefs as we do our arts. Philosophy is not another religion : it is a higher form, a development of Christianity. But beware of leaving your emotional religion behind you. Let the light of reason shine through your soul's windows, but keep warm by the fire of affection. You should be able to both feel God's love and see his wisdom."

"Then you, of course, think Christianity will be the religion of the future?"

"Surely I do. But why trouble about the future? It is to-day that we live, and to-day that we must both live nobly and think rightly. We must throw away no opportunities to-day which perception, energetic thought, and reverence for truth, can bring us, or to-morrow will still find us indolent to accept what to-morrow brings. Every one who is not morally dead has, I think I may affirm, some religion. They may deny the name and the fact, but it is Christianity which has impregnated the air with its germs of liberty and humanity to give 'free thinkers' their free thought and devotion to humanity. He who is true to principle and merciful to his neighbour obeys Christ's two commandments. I would have the men of to-day live nobly the present, not the past nor future. There are many orthodox doctrines, so called, which cannot but seem absurd or cruel to a reasonable man. Hell and Heaven as pictured by Dante, who does it with a far more liberal brush than many of the theologians of to-day, are a poetry, not a belief. They are forms only, and picture a mythology not more essential to the life of to-day than Homer's Olympus. All these things are but bodies which fall away and decay, but—and here is the secret of content—the spirit that vivifies them is only left free thereby to make new and more elevated and uplifting forms, which will be, whatever they are, the world's next creed. What is a vital necessity to us to-day is to hold close by this spirit, and understand that it is steadfast, and unchangeable, and serene. It is never past, nor to be ; it exists in the everlasting Now, and though its forms be Protean, it is simply itself."

"Won't following one's conscience bring one to that?" asked Bethesda timidly.

"The belief in conscience as the highest is like the Jewish religion, Miss Hamilton. They are both negative, and apply

only to individuals, not to humanity as a race. They are both full of 'sha'n'ts.' Look at the difference between the Commandments and the Beatitudes, and you will see what I mean. Besides, they neither of them have any serenity or centre of absolute principle. In the Old Testament, for instance, the Lord is represented as 'angry' or 'pacified.' As if we could 'grieve' or 'offend' God! He would be always angry, always grieved, always relentless, if he were ever so! We cannot alter the Eternal; but we may anger, and grieve, and offend, and alter our consciences, and this is what the Jews meant. The belief in conscience is apt to fall just as the Jewish religion did, but both have a prophecy of the Messiah inherent in them, and to both when the time is ripe a Saviour comes."

He smiled down at Bethesda very kindly as he rose to go, but the eyes she raised to his showed their unsatisfied hunger painfully. The smile faded from his face, and an anxious desire to help made him say:

"When any new perception of truth comes you may be sure it will be to one who is pre-eminently in the stream of Providence; that is, actively, and with his whole soul employed in the duties of life, trying to fill each one with the bounty of an unselfish ardour. Then we must get outside of the narrow limits of conscience into a recognition of something larger than ourself, in the good of society, of the nation, and thence the Church. It will come, but we must discipline ourselves for the highest by practice in the lower forms. We cannot afford to pass these by; if we do we lose all."

He bowed, and, accompanied by Mr. Blythe, departed.

"What a liberal clergyman!" said Bethesda.

"So liberal that his congregation will soon turn him off," remarked Mr. Stanhope drily. "Yet he has good ideas too. Blythe seemed greatly interested; eh, wife?"

"Yes, he needs some such man to talk to. He thinks a woman is peculiarly constructed for the purpose of having faith in things no man can believe in. Of course that is folly, but a great many men are like him. They even go so far as to prefer a woman should believe what they can see no sense in; it makes them more 'womanly,' they think."

"Now, you need not give me the benefit of all that sarcasm!" exclaimed Raleigh, laughing. "You know I am not one of those dreadful men!"

But Mrs. Stanhope only smiled absently. She was thinking of what had been said.

"When I was a girl," she remarked presently, "I knew a woman who felt herself made for something uncommon, and who prepared for it by idle waiting, because her talents were too noble for humble use. She tried after the unattainable, and dived after the unfathomable, to the neglect of all ordinary duties. Thus she lost all possibility of attaining the heights. Her feet, unaccustomed to the first steps of the ladder, could not through all her life climb more than the lower ones, and those with difficulty. The stars she worshipped, and longed impotently for wings to attain, passed her by, and shone in other skies. I worshipped her; I looked confidently for that wondrous revelation which was to surprise the world and blind it while her long-expectant eyes could alone sustain the light. But I recognised that it was long in coming, and I decided that I must content myself with lower things——"

"You would be the kitchen-maid," interrupted Raleigh, "and you are my Princess Cinderella. So put on your glass slipper, and let us go upstairs. Beth looks tired."

"You are all teaching me so much!" exclaimed Bethesda, with something of her old impulsiveness. "I shall not soon forget to-night's lessons."

And then the thought came to her with a sudden pang: How much interest would René take in such an evening's conversation? He rocked himself in his old creeds, while she was battling in the present; was this another side where they did not respond to one another?

CHAPTER VI.

"The gladness of true heroism visits the heart of him who is really competent to say: I court truth."—TYNDAL.

"Help us, O Lord, to feel that, when we put one hand bravely in that of Truth, the other is clasped in thine."—JOHN SNYDER.

IN spite of such conversations as these, and the invigorating books Mrs. Stanhope gave Bethesda to read, intellectual perception was still weak and impotent, like a new-born babe, compared to the mighty tidal-waves of passion which surged now

and again over the woman's heart and left her prostrate. Some little thing would recall the past, and she would turn sick and dizzy as one does in a heavily-perfumed room. One day when she came in from driving, and laid aside the cloak René had particularly liked, and the gloves fragrant with the perfume he had chosen, the vivid memories came over her with a suffocation of desire which was well-nigh insane. The red damask room, the buhl furniture, the deep windows and views therefrom, were all pictured before her in a flash which blinded her to her present surroundings.

Fortunately Agatha called her in a moment, and during luncheon the poignant sensation passed. But when she came out again and saw her wraps, she saw as distinctly the tall lithe form, the proud head, and deep eyes of one——

"I love!" she exclaimed in defiance.

She went to her own room, and paced up and down fiercely.

"What is the use of it all?" she cried beneath her breath.

"Let me be ill! I am tired of fighting and feigning; tired of pretending to be content when the source of happiness is poisoned; tired of keeping up appearances, and trying to make even myself feel that there is still much to live for. I don't wish to live! I am envious of every person whom I hear has been accidentally killed. Why should *they* be thus chosen? It is not just that I should pass untouched where others meet dear death. Why won't they let the stupor of illness deaden the pain of my brain? I want to die, to die!"

She had never acknowledged this to herself before; she had stifled, yet unborn, all such feelings; but now she was desperate. How much *could* one suffer and live?

That same day Agatha came in to call her for dinner, and found her asleep, and, when she tried, could not waken her. She bade the servant telephone for the physician who had formerly examined her niece's heart. He came. Bethesda had not moved; her breathing was hardly perceptible, and her pulse so faint as to be unnoticeable. She lay as still and almost as white as death, with purple shadows under her eyes, and her mouth inexpressibly sad.

The physician looked down at her with more feeling than he usually displayed.

"She is worn out," he said. "Let her sleep as long as she will. She can awake only to suffer."

"Do you mean that she cannot escape the disease now?" asked Agatha.

"I mean she must be a great deal worse before she can be better. I mean, dear Mrs. Stanhope, I mean that all your powers of nursing will be required to bring her through."

"Is the danger of death or lingering disease?"

"Of both. There is trouble with the brain as well as the heart."

"Is there danger of her being insane? You know I always wish to know the worst." Agatha put her hand behind her as she spoke, and grasped the high back of a chair.

"I think not," was the quick response, "I should say she had a strong mind?"

"An active one."

"And with good reasoning powers?"

"Yes."

"She is having a great trouble of some kind?"

"Yes."

"Has it reached the climax yet?"

"I don't know."

"She can bear little more. You must guard her in every way."

"I can't, doctor;" and then the brave woman broke down. This was the worst, that, do what she might, she could not protect the frail body from the gnawing mind.

She recovered herself in a moment, however.

"There is nothing to be done until she wakens, you say; and then?"

"Send for me. I will come again in the morning anyway."

He came without being sent for. Bethesda still lay in the childlike posture, with one hand beneath her cheek. They turned her over—the horrible dead weight!—and left her for another twelve hours. Then she wakened, and smiled at her aunt in the firelight.

"I have had such a good rest," she said. "It must be quite dinner-time."

She rose, and tried to dress, but found herself weak and languid. Mrs. Stanhope thought it best to tell her, very quietly, that nature had taken a rest in her despite, and that she had slept a whole day. Bethesda was a trifle startled, but the hazy calm which had settled upon her shielded her mind from active apprehension.

It was in the midst of an unusually warm and late Indian summer, and Mrs. Stanhope obeyed the physician's mandate in taking Beth out for long, slow drives over the prairie lands that rose and fell in wooded undulations to the dim horizon. Balmy winds blew from the south; an indefinable fragrance filled the air; the sunbeams shed only soft lights through the misty atmosphere; the few remaining leaves were golden, and the dark lines of branches were delicate and fine. Empty birds' nests suggested the spring-time with an added melancholy, and the birds, resting in their migrations, found, where had been the gloom of verdure, only shadows like mellowed light.

Someway the autumn, the ripening and falling time, came upon Bethesda with a peculiar force of sweetness. She seemed to feel as she would when she was middle-aged and calm, and life had become more meditative than active—and anguished—to her. She surrendered herself to it voluntarily. She was content to forget just now; she and nature together were quietly resting.

But all too soon they woke one morning to find their Indian summer gone, and in its stead winter was drearily throned for an unbroken reign. A wild prairie wind shrieked and sobbed and moaned around the house, and large fires barely sufficed to warm the rooms where a few days before the windows had been open to let the soft air enter and stir Bethesda's white dress and fine bronze hair.

She shivered now and collected herself, and tried to look the future bravely in the face. It was little over a month before her final decision must be rendered, and the correspondence with René planted, to bring forth what fruits it might, or annihilated for a practical eternity.

She investigated the abysses of her own mind as steadily as she could. Perhaps she had been unduly influenced by physical weakness, she thought. Perhaps she was unwilling to follow one course, whether conscience commanded it or not, so unconsciously closed that issue. This must not be. On what did René's greatest welfare depend? This was the important question. If she broke the correspondence definitely it might, instead of awakening his moral nature, destroy his belief in woman, and the bitterness would poison his whole character. If she wrote to him, her letters would be the result of long and severe thought, and she might lead him from doing what she said, to do what his conscience said. It would be a great shock

to him in any case to find that she had changed her opinions so much ; but the blow might benefit him, although he had such a buoyant disposition that he quickly adjusted himself to any burden given him to bear, and found it light. Too light ; it did not crush him enough to bring out the pure ore.

René was, however, very close to her all that evening. Indeed, was he not always near her ? She was not conscious of a moment when, either active or dormant, the thought of him was other than present. As she wakened it never came with suddenness that she remembered him ; the thought wakened with her, and was quietly in possession when she became fully conscious. She talked and read aloud, and listened to others, and his spirit was ever there, watchful, cherishing, seldom importunate—for he would not have been—but always read to step forward into the light of her active recognition when the imperativeness of other demands was answered. It was sweet and upholding ; it was as if he were consciously present, as at the Conovers' the evening before their departure, talking himself and leaving her free, but drawing around her a warm garment of unceasing attention and proud tenderness.

Several callers did not interfere with an unusually keen apprehension of René's presence until Mr. Connough commanded Bethesda's undivided attention by what he was saying to another caller—a Mr. Fluting.

Daniel Deronda was the topic of conversation, and Mr. Fluting had been drawing a comparison between Grandcourt and Deronda, and awarding his praise to the large sympathy of the latter. This immediately aroused Bethesda. She was not one of those who found Deronda unreal. Many of the touches a master-hand had given to his character touched home to her heart. Was not his writing with Mordecai like hers with René ? Was not his wide sympathy the element she had tried to make her own ? Had not she also been "early impassioned by ideas," and at least tried "to burn her fires on those heights" ?

"The tendencies of the times," remarked Mr. Connough decisively, "are to make such men as Deronda the ideal type. His sympathies were so spread out into the vague that he had no convictions ; he put himself in every one's place except his own. This is the end to which some of our best minds aspire. Is it good ? Is it beneficial to humanity ? For myself I doubt

it. I think we should have a generosity large enough to embrace ourselves."

"Some writer," suggested Mrs. Stanhope, "strongly advocates this lack of convictions. 'Convictions are crystallisations,' he says. 'It is freezing the water of life.'"

"Well, what does that amount to?" asked Mr. Connough, controversially. "Deronda, the modern ideal, let us say, did nothing until he was forced by his self-abnegation into the concentrated life-purpose of a one-idea'd man. We are few of us in a position to 'put ourselves back into the antediluvian period to sympathise with a megatherium'! There is some absolute duty for each one to perform, and we cannot expect Fate, in the guise of a Mordecai, to bring our work to our hands as it was brought to Deronda's. If we misdirect our energies the world misses the work we were born for, and we must each find it out for ourselves."

"Gwendolen in the same way waited for Deronda to tell her what was right, didn't she? She had the moral indecision that Deronda had intellectually."

"Yes, Deronda was Gwendolen's conscience. She was too egotistic a nature, perhaps, to have it awakened otherwise than by emotion, by having a conscience outside of her; but once awakened, absolute separation was necessary for her to be able to develop her real conscience. Had she married Deronda she would never have had any conscience of her own at all. She married a man self-determined at least, whatever his faults, and Deronda married a woman also self-determined. There was no chance about it; it was one of the must-be's of character."

What an insight was this for Bethesda! She seized on it with her quick intuition, and said:

"Then the right thing would be to be crystallised within oneself, and fluid to others."

"True, true!" exclaimed an incipient admirer of Bethesda's. "You have put it admirably, Miss Hamilton."

Mr. Stanhope was walking up and down the parlour, with his hands behind him. He stopped now, facing the group around the fire.

"Did you ever hear the legend," he said, "of a monk, a good but narrow-minded man, who tried to convince every one of his own particular creed, and failing, damned them eternally?"

No reflections, Mr. Connough ! Well, one day he fell asleep—a man must tire easily with such a weight of responsibility !—and in a dream he saw himself walking by a stream of pure water. Presently a beautiful youth appeared, and set many differently-shaped vessels on the bank, no two alike, but all transparent, and then, he filled each one with water from the stream. The good man was perplexed when the youth looked at him to see if he understood, and desired him to explain ; so the angel said : ‘ The water takes the form of the vessel which contains it, but it is always the same in itself. Remember this.’ And the old monk awoke, and he did remember it, and it changed him from a dogmatic sectarian to the widest-minded man of his times.”

“ And I believe with Beth,” added Mrs. Stanhope, “ that it is the same with what we are to ourselves and to others. We can have our convictions pure and true, and our sympathies fluid enough to follow each curve and line of other minds.”

“ There is a very good sermon in that story,” said Mr. Connough thoughtfully. “ I wish I could prevail upon my people to understand that reason is the very life of religion ; that we must serve God with our minds as well as our hearts.”

“ How do you explain ‘ reasonably,’ ” asked Mr. Stanhope, “ the necessity of this blind faith and cruel narrowness which has marked the Christian Church ? ”

“ I take it in this way,” was the reply. “ The emphasis placed on faith in the earlier centuries of Christianity was needed to consolidate the religion and make its truths, its injunctions, sink into the hearts of men. This speedily degenerated into superstition, and ignorance brought its inevitable result in sin. Then to the synthetic unity which faith had produced was brought the analytic power of doubt ; first in the Reformation, now in science, and I believe one will be of as inestimable value to humanity as the other. By scepticism our religion will be regenerated ; not in itself, for, as Christ taught it, it is eternally of the same perfection, but in the acceptance of it by men, which is what the world needs. As I said the other evening, by scepticism all the non-essentials will be eliminated, and like the sky when the clouds are swept away, it will be seen as one unstained sapphire of truth from the zenith to the horizon.”

“ Have you read any of Mallock’s books, Miss Hamilton ? ”

asked Mr. Fluting, turning away from the others with some impatience. He much preferred a *tête-à-tête*, where he could do all the talking, especially to such a listener. But she was not in an indolent frame of mind to-night. She was now, on the contrary, eager for food, eager for knowledge, aroused once more to the interminable combat. So she turned to Mr. Connough with Mr. Fluting's question.

"I don't know what to make of Mallock, do you?"

"He doesn't see far. He cannot answer the questions he propounds, but he voices the yearning of the time, and reaches more truth unconsciously than he does consciously. He makes love, conjugal love, the waiting ground or the antechamber of the divine. He tells men to seek the highest they do know, while waiting or seeking for the unknown. I think you will find everywhere that when men do not know God they do not comprehend the significance of marriage. And when they realise that entire self-surrender, and a finding of themselves in another is their greatest happiness, then they begin to understand what it is to give themselves to a diviner power, to an inexhaustible love, and so come to an apprehension of God."

There was a little silence after this. Even Mr. Fluting did not find anything immediately to say; but presently Mrs. Stanhope led the conversation back into more ordinary channels, and Mr. Connough soon rose to go. Mr. Fluting followed him, for Bethesda was immersed in the thoughts that had been awakened, and he found himself a little *de trop*.

Bethesda's earnest effort to see was not without success. In the night a startling possibility suggested itself, and dazed her at first. What if she should write to Madame d'Isten, tell the situation frankly, and hold herself at René's wife's commands?

It might open Louise's eyes, excite her jealousy, and thus make her realise her husband's worth, and incite her to strive to keep his affection. If this could be accomplished his best welfare would be secured. The passionate attachment between him and Bethesda should be used as a tool for the more perfect modelling of character.

But, would this be the result? Bethesda forced herself to look searchingly into the character over whose weaknesses she had hitherto drawn a sheltering veil. Louise d'Isten, so far as Bethesda knew her, was undeniably a weak woman. She was

selfish, and discontented, and passionate, with no effort to be otherwise. She had the faults of a narrow education, and a pernicious society. If Bethesda wrote, it might rouse her jealousy in such a way that she would hate her husband, and take revenge by giving free reins to all her desires. But the thought haunted Bethesda, and when next day a letter from René, forwarded by Mrs. Trescott, came, telling of his having been to see his wife, and having informed her of his literary compact with Bethesda, she thought this smoothed the path before her.

She was ready to humiliate herself in any way, if by so doing she could help René and Louise. Madame d'Isten was now definitely aware that such a woman as Bethesda Hamilton existed, and, not improbably, had some feeling of jealousy for her already. If so, would not the effect of the proposed letter be more towards action than complaint? Bethesda was sure that, although René had told his wife of the compact, he had given her no voice in the matter. She, Bethesda, would do this, and, moreover, would show Louise how she might win her husband more fully than ever, and in doing so, help him and assure both their happiness. What if she should even prevail upon Madame d'Isten to write to her, and then reconcile the conflicting elements? Ah, that would be worth living for! That would be work meet for repentance.

But presently common-sense began to reassert itself against this high romance, and humility taught her that these were fallacious self-deceptions. It was not her place to anticipate any such results from what had been sinful error from the beginning. She must seek a fuller and surer expiation.

While her mind was under the full effect of this disappointment she stood one afternoon in her bay-window, her spirit as sodden as the chill earth. She looked dully at the leaden sky, which seemed all of one hue, except where the rain-laden clouds were scourged onwards by the north wind. Involuntarily she contrasted this December with the June six months before. The wide streets, the avenues of blossoming trees, the statuary, the sweet air and sunny skies of *la belle France*,—how she yearned for them! The months contrasted sadly enough in other ways. Then the most fatiguing and constant exertions, the late hours and light sleep, could not detract from the gladness of heart which made her strong and buoyant. Now rest,

intellectual food, petting without limit, and the greatest care, could not prevent the heavy weight within from wearing her thin, and pale, and weak. It was the contrast of the flowering and decaying time.

In the midst of her dreary reflections a knock came at the door, and a cablegram from Evra was handed her—a tender message hoping she was better. It might have been the thoughts which had previously occupied her mind; it may have been the leap of her fluttering heart, but from the instant her eyes glanced down the lines she felt sure Ren's tenderness had planned it. And to Bethesda, struggling in the toils of conflicting principles, and almost ready for the renunciation of all happiness, it was like a voice, a touch from Paradise. Her load was inexpressibly lightened, and during the evening she looked lovely beyond compare.

Not long after this came her birthday, and both to celebrate it, and because of Bethesda's increasing fragility, Agatha asked Margaret to visit her for a fortnight.

The joy of the meeting between the sisters was tempered with great sadness, for Bethesda had failed steadily. When letters had come from Mabel, burdened with anxiety for both soul and body, and advocating, in season and out of season, her ideas of Beth's duty, they had made the weary woman perceptibly weaker. She felt an imperative need for freedom, and Mrs. Trescott constantly wished to guide and direct her, and she began to see the impossibility of drawing near to one, however affectionate, who wishes to throw chains about one.

But it had come to the pass now that nothing was of any vital consequence to her but integrity and the right. On these all her failing strength was concentrated. Let her questions be decided, and then the deluge.

On her birthday, when Bethesda was not able to leave the couch—a sad enough coming of age for the beautiful heiress—after she had transacted considerable business and made her will, Bethesda asked to be left alone with Marcot. He came and stood before her reverentially.

"Marcot," said Bethesda, "I know you are devoted to your master."

Marcot started. M. d'Isten had given him such strict injunctions never to breathe a word of his former service, that he supposed no one knew it.

"I believe you are also devoted to me," Bethesda pursued calmly. "I prove my trust in you by confiding to you this letter to be given to your master when I die. Don't fail to give it into his own hands, and let no one know you possess it, except M. d'Isten. I trust this to your honour, Marcot."

"I will give it only into my master's, Monsieur le Comte d'Isten's hand," said Marcot solemnly. "I swear it by——"

"Hush! Your word is sufficient. Only to him, or to me, if I should ask it of you; you understand?"

"I do."

"I wish you to know also that I have left you a small sum to support you when you are old, or ill, and to be a reminder of my thanks for your faithful service."

"I can never thank you, dearest lady," exclaimed the man, the tears streaming down his face, which he turned away to hide.

"Don't weep for me," said Bethesda, with utmost gentleness. "I shall be happier if I die. Tell your master so."

Her voice, too, broke, and she held out her hand for him to kiss.

"You are only fit for heaven," said poor Marcot, and he left her with the precious letter tightly buttoned beneath his vest.

René's letter for her, the first after the six months' silence, came the next day, a week in advance of its time. She laid it aside unopened. It might settle her actions when she came to read it. It did not seem right to her to forsake him utterly, yet René's highest perception of womanhood was embodied in her, and if right claimed that she should be silent as well as invisible to him she must accede. Intuition told her dimly, before she had gone far enough to perceive it by reason, that she could not help him; that this last joy and consolation, as many others, was denied them by their wrong-doing. They must, she feared, expiate separately. If she only had the real hope that he would expiate! but she was afraid his conscience might not awaken without her. Thus she was, in spite of their actual present divergence, still carrying out the principles Mrs. Trescott had instilled into her by education and practice; for she was endeavouring to occupy the same position towards René that Mabel strove to occupy towards her, and of which she felt so keenly the bondage. The difference was that René

gloried in his obedience, and served willingly the conscience of another, while Bethesda found it an unendurable burden.

The night between Christmas Eve and Christmas Day was a memorable one to Bethesda. Margaret had placed on easels at the foot of the bed two engravings ; one, a Holy Family by Raphael ; the other, of the Milan Cathedral. Bethesda lay looking at them most of the night. There was a strange sense of calm in and around her. She felt as if she were waiting for a voice to speak, and it recalled the fancy she had had, when, standing on San Miniato in the spring sunshine, she had listened to the echoes of the church bells, losing themselves in the purple Apennines. Then it was high noon ; now it was a winter midnight, but the feeling was the same.

As she lay in this clear-eyed calm, thinking how marvelously the little beginning of the Holy Family had developed into an infinite life, which, to those who believed, filled heaven, and made arts, ethics, and religion blossom into fullest luxuriance on earth, she seemed, without any transition, to have it clear in her mind that she was to abnegate all spiritual control over René ; that, as long as their present life separated them, they were to be separated absolutely, with no thought of further communication beyond the letter she would write to tell him this.

She had had this lesson still to learn : that she was presumptuous in thinking through her could come his only aid ; that if she did not actively help him he was lost. She knew now that no one can be lost or saved except by himself ; he must inevitably sink or rise with the meaning of his own actions.

Who was she, to take the responsibility of his deeds ? to answer for him in heaven or hell ? Had he no voice ? She could but trust in his nobility, his strength, his purity. If these failed him, in so far as these failed him, they would be eternally separated. The infinite would come between them.

It was not so hard as she had fancied to make this ultimate sacrifice. Never before had she realised how, with the strong desire to do right comes the strength to act. A few days before it had seemed to her that life was unendurable without active use to him ; yet now she felt upborne. The majesty of virtue ! It *commands* our obedience, and when we are willing to kneel as soon as the command comes, the great king unveils himself.

During the following week Mabel, alarmed by the accounts received from Agatha and Margaret, came on to S——. In the first interview they had alone, Bethesda told her aunt of her decision. Her words were few, and impregnated with a gentle weariness, undisturbed by tears, praises, and tears again, which were showered upon her. She seemed very far away from it all, and as if she were looking on something in which she had no part.

She lay on the bed all day lifted on numerous pillows, her face tired to faintness. Margaret hovered around her with unobtrusive attentions, and Bethesda liked to have her near. Hers was the only presence which did not weigh upon the sensitive woman.

"If you will just let me rest," she said once, when the physician came. "I don't want anything but rest and Margaret." And Margaret banished the others with more energy than that of which ordinary events would have shown her capable, and constituted herself a sister of the tenderest charity. She thought Beth would die, and when she remembered the past months of suffering, felt almost reconciled to losing her. She would soon join her where God would wipe away all tears from their eyes.

Bethesda lay thus all the holiday week, asking little, doing nothing except to bear the pain which steadily increased. Many flowers were sent her, and a fresh basket of the loveliest roses was constantly on the silken quilt beside her, a delicate attention from Mr. Stanhope. She lay amid the flowers like a snow-drift in spring, stealthily decreasing in strength, and likening more and more to its whiteness. She was quite passive in mind and body until New Year's Day, when she roused herself, conscious that now there was something for her to do. She gathered all her strength for the consummation of her sacrifice. This done, and she had nothing more to think about. Nothing more. The future from this day was a dead blank to her. To-day was all she had to live. To-morrow was beyond her thoughts.

She early asked Margaret to bring her the olive-wood box which contained René's letters, and those she had already mostly written, to be sent to-day. Then she had asked her sister to leave her, and kissed her on both cheeks, as if to fortify herself by these sweet touches.

When she was alone she broke the seal of René's long-

anticipated letter slowly. She trusted it would be strong and helpful, and yet she wished to be prepared for any event. As she read it her face gathered sadness which made her seem a woman arrived at the maturity of sorrow, and as she finished it her hand was pressed close against her heart.

The letter showed him blind, so blind ! These months had apparently brought him nothing of growth or clear-sight. He had not once questioned himself deeply in regard to their relationship. He did not recognise that there was anything to question. He had incorporated his position towards her into an unquestionable part of his existence. He saw no use in examining with a view to change what was unchangeable. And the woman's heart felt, if her mind did not yet recognise, that where there is no growth, love must die. It was the bitterness of this cup which she was now drinking.

He had enclosed a red leaf, the last on the Virgin Vine which wreathed itself around her window, now his. It recalled with absolute distinctness the many hours she had spent kneeling there. She could see still the solemn march of the stars across the violet sky, and feel again the deep content which had been one of her own strongest proofs that her position was not wrong. So divine is love, so high does it spring above all earthly stains to its quenchless source !

He was now in the same position, under the same influences, that she was then. She must remember this, and not be unjust, but give him time.

With the leaf, holding the heart's blood of the year, she closed her journal for ever. It was a fitting seal for the past.

She then read over and sealed her letter to Madame d'Isten. As she closed it, Margaret's voice was heard at the door.

"May I come in ? I have something for you."

It was a cablegram from René : birthday greetings, and hoping she was well.

The very sweetness of this attention, this thoughtfulness which was so sure a proof of affection, made the task before her still bitterer. But it must be done. She smiled faintly as she put the open telegram in her sister's hand, and said :

"A little longer, dear ; my work is not quite done," and Margaret reluctantly left her.

The letter to René was now to be finished ; the last—the very last. She told him of her change in opinions, and how it

had come about ; how she had struggled long, through conflicts the deathliness of which she let him guess that he might be aided to an equal devotion to principle ; and how at last she had become convinced that their correspondence would be a sin. The renunciation of it had not been without its consolation, she told him ; for if our greatest desire is to live rightly, truth becomes sweeter and dearer to us than any error possibly can be.

Then she spoke to him of his wife ; of how her aunt had told her that Madame d'Isten was in a precarious position, tempted to do wrong on every side, and that he had granted all her desires, however repugnant to himself. She recalled how they had once named him an "ideal husband," but said, that since she had thought more, she realised he failed with his wife, as they had with one another, in not holding principle highest of all. Where persons were to be sacrificed, he was generous in sacrificing himself ; but principles should never be sacrificed to any person. No happiness is so necessary as nobility. Indulgence is not always laudable. Instead of permitting any intercourse, even of the slightest, between his wife and her former lover, he should endeavour to prevent it with all his force. "Hurt her, no matter how deeply," wrote Bethesda ; "cut away her dearest wishes, but do not let her remain in the atmosphere of sin." He should be severe with himself as with her ; severe with her as with himself. Generosity may be weak ; mercy also ; clear-sighted justice should be the foundation of our actions. To his wife he could give aid ; her he could serve by active use, but he and Bethesda must bear the consequences of their past in complete separation. Their lives would bring their consequences in the future as well as the present. Like mingles with like throughout life and immortality, and so their lives would join or divide as they were similar or dissimilar.

To this letter Bethesda now added a few grateful lines for his good wishes, and ended with the words, "I trust you."

She said them over and over to herself as she sealed the letter, and in it her hopes, her life itself. She had fought hard ; she had thus far conquered. She had made her supreme renunciation to the cold but complaint-hushing majesty of virtue. That it was right was sufficient ; but she could not help feeling what a consolation it would be to know the tenderness of religion, and to do right because God willed.

What remained now but death?

"Margaret!" came the heart's quick cry, and her sister was in the room the same instant.

When Marcot brought word that the letters were registered and mailed Bethesda let herself sink back on the pillows, and, as Margaret bent to kiss her:

"Good-night, dear," she said, and fell asleep.

CHAPTER VII.

"Love is a distinction of two, who yet, for each other, are simply not distinguished. . . . I have my self-consciousness in another, not in myself; yet it is another in which alone I am satisfied and at peace with myself. . . . This perceiving, this feeling, this cognising of unity is love."

HEGEL.

"There are in the world but two loves—the love of self extending to the contempt of God, and the love of God extending to the contempt of self."—ST. AUGUSTINE.

BETHESDA'S letter reached René one day in January as he was about to go to the *ministère*. He turned back to his room, the one she had occupied, where a cheery fire was burning, and every article of furniture, every breath of air, seemed to welcome him in the name of his beloved. How good she was to be thus always beside him. How many men would wish to be in his place, feeling themselves watched over by the tenderness of so incomparable a woman!

He seated himself in the wine-red fauteuil, where her dainty form had often been luxuriously supported, and took from the locked drawer of the desk her picture, which he turned towards him and regarded with joyous expectation.

"Thou hast written," he cried. "Once more naught is between us. Thou art my Béthesda!"

He touched the letter to forehead, lips, and breast before opening it with Oriental homage, as if to pledge his whole being to her anew, and then he broke the seal.

Three hours later he still sat staring at the pages in his hands.

Yet the dethronement of all his ideal hopes had not come upon him with the suddenness Bethesda had anticipated.

During the months of silence between them he had, with his usual foresight, attempted to face every possibility, and adapt his possible codes of action to the various manners in which Bethesda might write. In hearing of her failing health, and seeing Mrs. Trescott's increased rancour towards him, he understood the battle Bethesda was fighting, and had tried to follow her by guesses, some approximating the truth, some as distant as the poles from the reality. By dint of these imaginings he had fancied he was prepared to face anything, from a burst of warm sunshine to a temporary eclipse ; but the complete sacrifice she asked was a renunciation surpassing any he had dreamed of making.

Once recognising her unbiassed will, however, it became his sole possible course. He never thought of combating her decision ; he accepted it as supreme and inviolable. His submission was not easy ; on the contrary, it was inexpressibly hard. He read over and over again her words with dry, burning eyes ; with an agony of sorrow that bliss was denied them both ; with a bitter outcry against fate ; but always with entire obedience to her.

Had any one praised or blamed him then, he would have looked at the speaker in bewilderment and said simply :

"How can I do differently ? Do I not love her ?"

Such obedience to what is accepted as the highest, such devotion to what one beloved asks, is perhaps the most perfect of all foundations for nobility of character. In this René d'Isten's nature was of the finest feminine fibre,—as prayer is feminine, as the Church is said to be the bride of Christ,—but it was also feminine in that it obeyed and followed where Bethesda reasoned and led. This was not altogether wrong. The two had in some ways interchanged their attributes, as all men and women must at certain periods. It is a woman's place to be a lawgiver in family relations, as it is a man's in politics and science. It is a woman's place to lead in spiritual things, in fine perceptions of truth, in the chiselling of life, as it is a man's to lead in hewing out the strong blocks of institutions which build up the world. Woman must be in many instances conservative and discriminating, where man can be audacious and radical ; but it is only as all these feminine and masculine qualities modify one another by interadoption that the perfect human being ensues.

Now René was far from perfect. His obedience was not to God nor right, but to the creature he loved best. He had himself said of the ardent phrases which Thomas à Kempis addresses to the lover of his soul, "I could sooner say that to my friends than to God." And now his words were verified. Had it been possible for him to imagine Bethesda commanding him to do something wrong, as now she did the right, he knew he would have obeyed, trusting her beyond himself. And he did at present. He could not see the wickedness of exchanging letters with the purest woman he had ever known, but since she said so he would think it so.

The suppressed anguish within him at last, however, drove him to restless pacing of the room. A thirst for a sight of her, for a glance into her eyes, for a touch from her hand, was so extreme that his brain reeled. To make this renunciation visibly with her, to have palpable contact at least long enough to separate,—these were his maddening thoughts.

He tore open his cravat and leaned far out of the window, where the leafless vines were rubbing dully against the wall. The bleak wind around his head was balmy in comparison to the icy doom upon him. He drew back with a groan, and took her picture in both hands and looked into the steady eyes with a wild intensity.

"Never to see thee again?" he muttered. "Never to hear thy voice? Never to touch thy hand? Ah, how cruel is God! It would be so little to him, so much to me—to us! For thou lovest me, Esda. Each word of thy earnest sentences is pressed full of tenderness. And God to destroy such love! But it cannot be destroyed! It will endure! it shall endure! In spite of the world and time and death, we shall be united somewhere!"

He had raised his hand as if taking an oath; now slowly it fell to his side, and before her picture he dropped to his knees.

"Help me, Béthesda, as thou hast done. Thou art a saint and holy; thou raisest me with thee. We cannot be disunited. We will be true to one another for ever. So help me God and Esda!"

He rose with a reverential quietude in his manner, and adjusted his dress, and took his hat to go out; but he turned as he reached the door, hot tears standing in his eyes. The contrast between the incoming and the outgoing was excruciat-

ing. He faltered, then flung his hat aside, and fell down before the red chair, burying his face in it, while his form was convulsed with hard sobs.

He looked years older when he finally stood erect again, and his eyes were sunken and dull. He pulled his hat down over them and went out, this time without turning back. A long walk somewhat re-established his equipoise, and with it came a great compassion for her who had been obliged to transfix her own heart in thus stabbing his. He went rapidly to the Bourse and sent the following cable message :—

“Thy will is my law.”

Invigorated by this he returned to his hotel, and wrote to Louise in the spirit that Bethesda had commanded. He asked his wife to come to him, saying that he had committed errors as great as hers, but not greater, and that he believed it was their duty to help one another, resigning themselves to the bond which united them, and endeavouring to strengthen and ennoble each other's lives. He spoke clearly but tenderly of the temptations which he knew assailed her, and asked her to think seriously before she again refused to come to him. He told her that an angel from heaven had given him new light, which he asked her to share, so that they might strive towards the right together.

He wrote with a profound sadness, and, he thought, as profound a resignation ; but, when the letter was done, he turned to Bethesda's former letters with an *élan* of desperation which was thoroughly characteristic of the man.

Outwardly, in actions, in words, in appearance even to himself, he bent to the inevitable with a pliancy which was as far removed from weakness as is that of a finely-tempered steel blade. But deep within him at times there came a fierce revulsion, a snapping back of the defiant sword, which shocked his whole physical and psychical system, and left him tingling with a surcharge of electric force. This was his condition now. Had the chivalric spirit within him been restored to the chivalric era whence it descended, he would, in this mood, have traversed lands and seas, and won the woman he loved at the point of the sword, regardless of all laws save those of force and love.

But the woman he loved did not belong to that era. She was essentially modern,—that is, endowed with the supremacy of mind over matter, of morality over desire, of thought over

action ; and he recognised that, did he have her in his power, did he hold her never so close, the gulf between them would be only widened, implacable, absolute. His sole power of bridging it was in yielding, and drawing near to her, above the physical, in the same spirit as that which possessed her, thus annihilating space, and making them to stand side by side, heart touching heart, in spite of distance and silence.

The fierce ancestral ultraism was exorcised, and he cleaved with new strength to his allegiance. He again took out her last letter and pored over it, weighing every sentence, and reading to the subtlest feather touch of feeling between the lines.

She was crushing her heart down under the weight of rigid law, before which she had laid herself and him as before a Juggernaut, looking with calm but unutterably sad eyes at the advance of the deity to whom all sacrifices were due. His darling ? His Esda ? Was her delicate, sensitive nature thus to be mangled and he stand by motionless ? Horrible ! But—and the thought made him seat himself again whence he had risen with fury—it was her will, it was her command, and they were but one. What she did he did, as by a law of nature.

The next day René was writing an answer—his final words—to Béthesda, when several letters were brought him from Louise. He had received none for some time, as floods had interfered with postal arrangements.

Before receiving Bethesda's letter he had written to Louise with veiled suggestions, and had quoted several things Bethesda had admired. In one of the letters now before him Louise said these remarks had inspired her with the wish to be near him, protected from herself by him, and she had resolved to leave the following week for Paris. On further thought, however, she had concluded to spare him this derangement of his life, and the annoyance she might cause him. This was the last time, she wrote, that she would speak of her troubles ; not that she should cease to be frank, but because there would soon be an end of this for her. She begged him to think of her with compassion on the day when her lover was to be transferred to another province, and yet not to be sorrowful, for she would soon be no longer in danger of soiling his name and honour.

What did it mean ? The letter was the gentlest he had ever received from her. Was she decided on entering a convent, of which she had often spoken ? Or was she again think-

ing of suicide? Or did she simply wish to imply that with her lover's departure she would be no longer tempted?

This was the most probable, but the others were quite possible. She was of an unreasonable cast of mind, and prone to follow every impulse. What would have been Béthesda's advice were she there now? He quickly decided, and sent Louise a despatch saying that an important letter had crossed hers, and for her to do nothing until she received it, unless it was to come to him, which would greatly gratify him. Then he wrote testifying his sympathy, and forgiving her freely, saying he also had need of forgiveness, and urging her to come to him.

There are few men who demand of themselves as much as they do of their wives, and who consider that a sin is as great in a man as a woman. It was one of the best traits of René d'Isten's character that he had given himself even less liberty than he had accorded to Louise, and that now he was quick in acknowledging his fault as grave as hers, although there were not as many months in his error as there were years in hers, and many circumstances which had seemed to purify his connection with Béthesda were lacking in Madame d'Isten's situation. Although René d'Isten had fallen from the ideal of stainless purity, which was now being developed in him through Béthesda, many men would be bettered if they did no worse. It was his consciousness of this which had assured him of his power to be "unlike other men." He had at least lived up to the intellectual perception of purity which he had gained through his wife's experience, and now he was advancing ahead of it and of her.

When he returned to his letter to Béthesda he told her what had occurred, and added: "My life shall be spent in fulfilling thy desires. God sent me Béthesda as one of his heavenly host in the hour of great need. Without her what would I have been? When the devil tempts me a voice from the depths of my conscience calls: 'Béthesda!' and the temptation flees. When I wish help and advice I think: 'What would Béthesda say?' and my mind becomes clear. When I need strength to follow the dictates of wisdom I invoke thee to aid me."

It seemed more than he could do, more than strength would allow, to send away this letter,—this acquiescence in a lot which was torture; this ultimate, final word. But "Béthesda

wills!" came up from his heart, and he accepted what was decreed by her beloved hand.

The letter was registered and sent, and then he succumbed to a *morne* despair. It lasted all the long night; but René knew too well the vital necessity of equilibrium to let himself be thrown from it without a struggle. There are some natures to whom this centre of gravity is more necessary than to others. To lose it means to them to lose sanity, an irretrievable loss. Others can be pushed down on either side, can be crushed almost in their fall, and yet regain, even retain, mental action. Such was one of the differences between René and Béthesda.

In the icy dawn René walked swiftly down the Champs Elysées—bitter mockery!—and on and on interminably. As he reached a church where he had once been with Béthesda early Mass was just beginning, and the organ notes seemed to summon him to enter. He went in. There were few present, only some working girls, thin and worn, who, in the midst of this great sceptical city, had risen early to have a word of comfort before proceeding to their dreary drudgery.

M. d'Isten stopped just inside with his hat in his hand but little reverence in his heart. At a side altar near him a young priest was droning through the service in an uninterested monotone. The church was close, and chill, and dark. It all seemed to him senseless frippery and affectation. One touch, a single breath from the lips of his beloved, would mean so infinitely more to him, and *this* God denied him. He turned to go. Just then there flashed the first level sunbeam through the painted window against the pillar where Béthesda had stood mouths before. The golden light in the dark church might have easily been mistaken for the visible glory around the head of a saint.

René sank on his knees. His eyes were fixed with wide intensity on the yellow sunshine, and, as plainly, he saw the shining masses of hair, the pearly brow, the deep eyes which looked at him, which held him, which shone through him with an unspeakable tenderness and bravery. They quelled each rebellious thought, every element of despair, and left him, as the vision dissolved, resigned.

He drew a long breath and rose. There were a dozen pairs of curious eyes upon him, but he did not notice them. They saw him drop several Napoleons into the *aumônière*, and

go out into the now sunny street with a lightened step. He had lifted the burden God and Esda had given him to bear with a heartfelt peace. The two were the same to his mind for the time. Obedience to the one meant now, at least, submission to the other.

CHAPTER VIII.

“The aim of life is action, not a thought.”—CARLYLE.

“How strangely fair
Yon round still star ! which looks half-suffering from,
And half-rejoicing in its own strong fire,
Making itself a loneliness of light.”

ON returning to his rooms René d'Isten found no small event to try his new-found tranquillity. A telegram from Louise awaited him, demanding that he should come to her. She had received a letter from America, and was ill.

The news alarmed and angered him. Had Mrs. Trescott taken it upon herself to interfere? This was too much. There was no saying what awaited him, or where it would end. Complications were entangling themselves around him. He was unprepared for this, and it was singularly distasteful to him. He strenuously objected to disturbance of regulated actions, or, if anything was to be changed, he wished to have the master-hand in the matter. This surprise, thus sprung upon him where his position was weakest, annoyed him extremely. He did not think of it as a possibility, in these first moments, that Bethesda was the one who had written to Louise.

But even if she had—for he came to this at last—it was not her place to have taken such a responsibility, and, for the first time in their whole acquaintance, he was thoroughly out of sympathy with an action which perhaps was hers. He was willing to leave the guiding of his life, his happiness or misery, in Béthesda's hands ; but when she came into the relations between him and his wife, from the wife's side, she overlooked limits which she ought to have seen and regarded.

How often do men argue in the same manner with their

submission to God! The parallel is not irreverent here, for, to René d'Isten, Bethesda at this time practically represented God. He submitted to her decrees, threw his heart before her, laid himself at her feet in profound humility, he thought; but there were *some* conditions with which she must not interfere unless she wished him to rebel, and here was one of these. Yet, perhaps, could Bethesda have seen him during these moments of anger and severe blame of her, she might have bravely recognised that this was what she had aimed at, for in truth she was detaching him from herself, and attaching him to the place where his duty lay, and thus her end was being accomplished.

He sent a telegram to Louise saying he would start that night, and for her to trust in him. Then he went to the *ministère*, where he found some trouble in gaining leave of absence, and in the evening threw himself into the express with the determination to resist all intrusions, and arrange his life to suit himself. He was worn out; his nerves were unstrung with the tense strain of severe and conflicting emotions; but, as the train whirled him through the dark land, and all voluntary motion was unnecessary, he seemed to leave his body resting in the corner, while his mind was free and active. In this state, in the solitary silence of the carriage, with the stars looking down, better thoughts came to him.

If Mrs. Trescott had done this—why, that was one thing, and he clearly had a right to be indignant; but if Béthesda, his Esda, had written to Louise—that was quite a different affair. What would she have written? What would have been her reasons for writing at all?

He took out her letter, and re-read it. Why she should have written was still a mystery, but, if she had written, it probably was to try and bring Louise to him, as here in this letter she had tried to take him to Louise.

Would a woman who loved do that? Could she? Was jealousy so far removed from even the saintliest feminine breast as to desire and work to the end of being replaced? Impossible! And yet, if any woman could do it, that woman would be Béthesda. He could imagine her standing between him and Louise, and joining their hands, with a far-away tenderness in her deep eyes.

Bah! He was idealising her too far! He was making

her into a bloodless angel, not a clinging, devoted, impassioned woman, such as he—no one so well!—had known her.

But if it were Béthesda who had written, which he more and more inclined to believe, this should be the end towards which he would work. He would show Louise that the alteration Béthesda had made in him was all for the better, that he had gained a new strength under her influence, and was now, at her wish, ready to sacrifice a great and innocent happiness which might offend Louise.

“Ah, beloved!” he exclaimed, smiling softly. “Not thus canst thou detach me. So long as I live nobly, it will be hand-in-hand with thee.”

When he reached M—— his anxieties were on the alert, but outwardly he was calm; perhaps even a trifle more unruffled than usual. He kissed the hand of his mother-in-law, who met him with a sharp interrogation in her eyes; asked after his wife’s health with solicitude, and, learning that she was no better, and almost delirious with desire to see him, excused himself instantly, and went to her apartments.

Louise was in the somewhat untidy, though luxurious boudoir, lying on a sofa in a *negligée* of crimson wool, over which her hair fell in stray locks that gave her a gipsy-like appearance. Her handsome face was disfigured with weeping, and, beneath that, an habitual expression of discontent. Her mouth was unpossessed and trembling, and, as she saw René, she rose impetuously and fell upon his neck with a sudden cry of—

“My husband! my husband!”

Never had he been so warmly greeted by her, and it was with sadness that he thought what joy such a welcome would at one time have given him. Now it was too late.

He supported her, however, with a firm tenderness, and gradually made her more composed by reassuring words. He prevailed upon her to sit down at last, and placed himself beside her. Even as he did so a crumpled letter, half-hidden among the pillows, and bearing the well-known characters of Béthesda’s handwriting, caught his eyes.

It was from her, then. The thought steadied him. The consistency of Béthesda’s character made it possible for him to repose upon her. With Mabel the opposite would have been the case, and the reasons equally good.

Louise, quick to see now, noticed his glance, and instantly seized the obnoxious letter, and thrust it into his hands.

"Read it!" she cried, with a passionate wail in her voice. "Tell me if it is true. Who is this woman who writes to me so authoritatively? What has she to do with me, or I with her?"

She had caught his arm, and was leaning forward to look in his face with wild eyes.

"Let me read it first," was the gentle answer.

"No! no! tell me first. I cannot wait longer. Who is this 'Bethesda Hamilton'? See! there is the name signed. Now, who is she?"

There was a fiery rebuke in her eyes, but he met them without fear. After a moment's steady gaze he said slowly:

"Do you forget what I told you of a literary correspondence with Miss Hamilton? I will add this now: She is the noblest of women, and she is your and my best friend."

"Ah, my René! my husband! do not say that!" cried Louise, throwing herself back in despair; "she too says it, she too! and now you confirm her!—Am I then nothing to you?"

She tried to draw herself up haughtily at these last words, but he laid his hand over hers and said in a low tone:

"Thou art my wife, Louise; thou must remember that. We must always be much to one another."

"Must!" exclaimed Louise, with bitterness. "No, it is not necessary. I can free myself—and you."

"Not without crime," said René in a distinct whisper.

She shrank away from him appalled.

"Read the letter," she said; "we will talk afterwards."

She sat and scanned his face as he read. He did not hasten; he wished to be well permeated with the spirit of Bethesda.

She was in truth the angel he had dreamed, only far surpassing his vision in compassionate tenderness and pathos. It was no bloodless saint who wrote this, but one whose blood became the wine of life to others.

"Well?" said Louise impatiently, as she saw his eyes reach and linger on the end.

"Did I not speak truth?" he answered with a proud and reverential tone.

"How?" asked Louise defiantly.

"Hast thou once thought, Louise, of what this letter meant

to her? Hast thou thought what she takes from herself to offer to thee? She has told you nothing but the truth, and the whole truth. She held the destinies of my life in her hand, and for you, on your account alone, Louise, she has sacrificed herself and me. She has given up all the innocent happiness we might have had without infringing your rights, but which she feared might offend you. Further,—listen a moment, Louise,—further, she speaks to you as to a sister; she asks you to let her be a sister to you. She has sympathy with you and a heart full of compassion, but she knows also what is right, and she is too humble to think herself stronger than others, and so expects them to do whatever right may demand. Ah, it is hard, Louise! She knows it, and I know it. But to noble natures it is possible. She knows thou hast much nobility, for I also spoke the truth, and you see she appeals to that nobility in you. She desires, she yearns to help you to overcome temptation and sorrow. She sees that it is right for you and me to be united, and she tries to make us happier for her coming into our lives. This is the angel who shed a new light on my path. She has, I know well, already made me a better and a truer husband to you, Louise. Let her help you also. She says here, see, that there is no happiness which would be so great to her as to aid you in carrying your burdens, or in relieving you from them. She would be willing to carry the burdens of the whole world to help others!" he exclaimed in an irrepressible outburst. Then calming; "Louise, my wife, why should this letter, so brave, so gentle, have caused a tumult in your soul, except because you know she advises you rightly? During the seven years that we have been married, you will acknowledge that I have not complained. Neither do I now. Let this letter commence a new era in our lives, Louise. We have both erred; we both need forgiveness. I give you mine freely; give me yours, and let us walk together towards where this saint's hand points."

Louise d'Isten was melted and silenced, she knew not how. The something new in her husband produced a profound impression upon her. The modulations of his voice stirred her strangely; its reticent sadness, its dignified contrition touched the barren rock of self-pity into a gushing, if momentary, fountain of sorrow for another.

She struggled with her tears a few moments in silence.

Then she turned and buried her face on her husband's breast, and clung to him with an entirely new yearning. He held her to him closely, and his face was illuminated as he murmured in his heart :

“Art thou content, Saint Esda?”

René stayed with his wife for six weeks. They drew closer together than they had ever done through the communion of a sorrow shared, a double forgiveness, and an awakening of new life in the feelings of Louise towards her husband. She was quite ill for a time; now burning with fever, and again exhausted by its reaction. He tended her with the closest care, and an almost feminine delicacy; but there was a distance between them she could never cross. Sometimes she would waken to find him staring at the floor with an expression of such pain that it tore her heart. Yet she could not appear to be awake or his face would change instantly to a look of cheerful service, and the mask he kept for her, she told herself bitterly, would again cover his face.

Remorse and retribution were mingled in those days for her. She was beginning to realise what she had thrown away, and with her lover's ultimate departure, which had occurred the day before René's arrival, the stronghold of selfishness and mistaken devotion was thrown down, and nothing was left to interfere with the invading army of feelings, hopes, and fears, complex and mystifying even to herself, which had possessed her since she had seen her husband in his new aspect, and had known the strong forces at work in his life.

She felt an insuperable jealousy for Béthesda, and yet an awe, as of something uncomprehended and powerful, in view of the supreme renunciation which that distant woman had made in her behalf. She began to ask herself unwilling questions: Would she have done such a thing for the wife of Alphonse? No! was the instant defiant answer.—But then, that was not the same; it could not be the same; and yet, she was forced to ask: Why not? Surely René, her husband (again defiantly), was worthy of a woman's love, more so, indeed, than most men. This Béthesda was not the first one who had found him noble in character and fine in intellect. And then she turned to study him, and to see in him the many traits which a woman, “if she were so inclined,” would love. Gradually she found herself becoming detached from the past which was perforce gone from

her, and working in the present ; half unconsciously it is true, but perhaps none the less earnestly ; while towards the future she looked with a wholly unknown zest,—something more than zest—a desire, a longing to make the future different and better, and to do somewhat for René as he had been so long, she now saw doing for her.

From this point she grew better, and many were the long and quiet talks she and René had during the weeks which followed all too swiftly. There was a calmness, a *recueillement* about him at times, however, which drove her to solitary despair. She was put and kept so far away ! She had put herself there, true ; it had used to be her pleasure, but now, in spite of her endeavours, still paroxysmal and egotistic, something ever came between them ; a distance, a transparent wall of feeling, which separated them relentlessly.

Sometimes she would go to the mirror, after a recognition of this blank fatality, and would push back her hair, and gaze at the handsome face pitifully enough.

“Of course you are not comparable to that blonde Béthesda !” she caught herself saying one day. “She is beautiful, and young, and fresh,—and you ? You have cried away your beauty, and your youth, and your freshness ; he cannot care for *you* !”

She threw a veil over the mirror, and went away sullenly. It was no use trying. Alphonse might forgive her for the beauty which had been lost through grief for him, but this would hardly be a passport to René’s favour. That fair Béthesda, with her earnest devotion and incomprehensible self-sacrifice, kept constantly coming between her and her husband. Ah, she knew what it was ! Had not Alphonse’s face haunted her most when her husband was present ? And—and now,—she did not know what to make of it ; it required an effort for her to be able to recall his features. But René had no effort to make to see this *Américaine*’s. No, not he ! There he was now writing, and if not to her, he was thinking of her. “I might as well be dead, and out of the way at once,” she murmured between half-suppressed sobs.

And then René would close the desk softly, and would join her, and draw her to him—“As if I were his sister !” she would think indignantly. But she would not move away, and soon either the tones of his voice, or the sight of his self-contained

face, would hush her complainings, and once more good spirits would reign.

The mother-in-law knew nothing of the explanation which had brought Louise and her husband closer together than ever since their marriage. It was not a request of René's, but an instinct in the heart of Louise, that kept Béthesda and all pertaining to her a conjugal secret. At least in this she was nearer her husband than any one else; and meantime he spoke to his wife quite freely, if with tact, of Béthesda. He wished to keep the fact of her bringing them together continually before the mind of Louise, and indeed of his own. He was growing to feel a certain sense of her being out of his reach, beyond him, which the entire silence falling after her last noble words naturally increased. To dispel this he would talk to Louise of Béthesda's character, and aims, and history. He told her of the family conditions surrounding Béthesda; of her position and wealth; but his manner was always as if he were mentioning one very dear to him, now dead. Occasionally a perception of this would come over him with a shudder. It might be a presentiment.

It was in consequence of these conversations that Madame d'Isten finally resolved to write to Miss Hamilton. She did not know what she should say, but she believed the act would please her husband, and it was only polite to acknowledge the receipt of her letter, and to tell her that she was not offended. For it had really come to this. She was no longer offended with Béthesda; she felt the good this catastrophe had brought her, and fore-felt the developments which in the future might spring from it. Not that she was conscious of any of this, but the possibilities hovered about her like protecting angels, and seemed to enshrine the thought of the far-away woman in an atmosphere of benignity, and, yes, of gratitude.

It would have been impossible for her to express this, but when one day she came to René, and said timidly:

"Would you like me to—to write to——"

"Béthesda?" he exclaimed, springing up, and catching her hands in glad approval.

Almost as quickly did he realise what was in her mind, and the manner in which she regarded his saint. So, his fairest dreams were perhaps to be accomplished! Béthesda and Louise would be personal friends! It was almost too good to be true.

He drew Louise towards the desk to secure the good deed while she was still in the mood ; and she seated herself, trembling a little, not alone with fear, but with the stabbing pain of jealousy that came and went in her heart. He liked her so much better now that she was going to do something for this "Béthesda !"

He spread paper and ink and pen before her, and then moved away, not to disturb her, and to indulge in the visions this act of hers created. But it was not at all her purpose to let it separate them ; what she wished was to be near him, to have him take an active interest in her,—he might at least while she was writing this letter ! So she called him back to tell her how to commence it, and then, what should she say ?—Didn't she know ?—Of course she didn't ! This woman was a writer, and he must express it all for her, dictate it to her, in fact. He was too wise for this, however, and only asked her, what did she wish to express ? That was precisely the point, she replied ; what did she ?

Then there came a quick perception to him of the lack of earnestness in her, and a sight of the grieved face of Béthesda had she seen the light spirit in which her poignant utterances were to be answered. His manner grew very grave, and he spoke to Louise with the greatest seriousness, taking out Béthesda's letter, and re-reading her parts of it, which did not lose any of their pathos in his rendering.

Soon Louise was weeping on his shoulder, crying out that she was not worthy to be his wife, and that she wished she could be dead, or better.

"That last is right," said he, encouragingly. "We must both wish to be better. My wife has no need to wish death ; neither ought she. Our life is given us to live, and to live as nobly as we can, not to throw away. Look up, my Louise. Be strong. Take thy pen and write. Answer this letter as it is written. Tell her frankly what you feel. It will be received with more tender comprehension than any one, except God, could receive it."

Thus exhorted, Louise wiped her eyes, and commenced the letter. Her husband sat close beside her, his hands folded, and his eyes bent on the floor. She looked at him many times during the first few sentences, which were embarrassed and confused ; but he did not glance at her, and she felt the spell of

his will to continue. Presently the volubility of her own emotions overcame her; her timidity was swept away in the stream of expression which seemed to gush from her very heart. She almost forgot to whom she was writing, and felt more as if this were a sacred confession, than a letter to any one.

Soon René found that he could look at her unnoticed, and he was surprised to find the vivid interest he took in watching the turbulent expressions which chased one another across her face, as her hand swept over page after page. Tears and fire alternately extinguished one another in her eyes; her mouth now moved with a passionate exclamation, and again grew piteous with a sense of her sorrows. And at last, when she signed her name and threw down her pen, holding the still wet sheets out to her husband, she had never appealed to him more.

He took the pages from her, and pressed a warm kiss on her hand; a caress which made her rise abruptly and leave him. She stood in the embrasured window looking out on the busy street regardless of everything. "What will he think?" she was saying to herself, and wishing—almost wishing—she had not given it to him.

When he had not half finished he came up behind her, and drawing her arm through his led her to a seat.

"My wife," he said in a tone penetrated with tender comprehension, "there is much left to us yet."

Then he sat beside her holding her hand while he completed the epistle. The letter had done service already, whether it ever reached its destination or not. It had cleared away much of the *débris* of the shattered past, and shown René the love which was sprouting, all unconsciously to Louise, amid the fragments and the dust now watered by tears of repentance. Was it too late?

At the same time that he had this letter registered he took from the mail a note forwarded from Paris. It was from Miss Conover, saying she was in the city, and would be pleased to see him. Just at the end there was a perturbing question: "Have you heard whether Miss Hamilton is better? Her severe illness since New Year's Day alarms me. I am hoping daily for a letter from at least Mrs. Trescott."

Bethesda severely ill, and all communication broken! Suffering for him too! The whole fierce tide of his longing set suddenly towards her again. It was too much to be borne in

inaction. He must hasten to Paris, where, through Miss Conover, he might occasionally hear of his beloved, his angel, his saint—perhaps already his saint in heaven !

Louise was now quite recovered, and able to journey to Paris if she liked, and his leave of absence had been unduly prolonged. He asked her the same evening if she would return with him. It was necessary he should go at once.

Louise looked up at him quickly, and urged him to stay with her old imperiousness, which he had generally obeyed. But now he was inflexible. Indeed his anxiety made him pre-occupied and stern, an effect which Louise was not long in perceiving. She waited and watched ; asked until the morning before she should decide ; went and consulted her mother, who did not aid her even by contradiction, showing an entire indifference. Finally Louise took her courage in both hands, and asked René somewhat abruptly :

“ Have you news of Béthesda ? ”

His mind was so full of the thought that he was not surprised.

“ Yes,” he said, in a tone of such tense self-control that it was almost harsh ; “ a friend in Paris writes me she is severely ill. She may now even—— No, she *cannot* be—— ”

He broke off short, and walked with long strides to the window. He stood there a long time quite motionless, and the twilight deepened unbroken and chill around them. When he turned at last Louise spoke in a low voice :

“ I think I will not go to Paris with you.”

“ Always do as you like,” he answered, a weary indifference piercing through the courtesy of his tone.

She rose and came to stand beside him, where he had fallen into a chair.

“ No, my René,” she said, with a gentleness that roused him. “ It has been, as you say, always as I liked ; now I hope it will be something better. It is for your sake, dear René,” she said, suddenly dropping to her knees beside him ; “ it is for your sake I say I will not go to Paris. If—if you are anxious, you will not want me, and—and—— ”

“ Come,” he said simply, putting one arm around her as she knelt there. “ Come with me.”

“ No, no ; not now,” she answered, rising. “ It is too soon ; I could not get ready. My maid will not go—I—— ”

"Put these things aside, Louise," said her husband earnestly. He had risen also, and was standing facing her. It would be hard for him to have her there; he knew that; but he knew also it was what Béthesda would have wished. "Don't let little things stand in the way, for it is *right* we should be together. Come."

But her devotion, such as it was, was entirely personal. "Right" was a chilly word; he should go alone.

Perhaps pique strengthened this feeling, and innate obstinacy fixed it. In any case, she would not go with him; their good understanding was broken; and it was a relief to him when in the next mail train he left alone for bachelor life, and news of Béthesda in Paris.

CHAPTER IX.

"If to conquer love has tried,
To conquer grief tries more . . . as all things prove,
For grief indeed is love and grief beside."

MRS. BROWNING.

"She cried, 'I am the sister of white Faith
Who sits serenely in the open heaven,
To whom I minister; thus ever driven
About the world, and Anguish named.
Yet I

Too, am divine.'"

W. C. ROSCOE.

On arriving in the city René went immediately to the address Mademoiselle Cinoni had sent him. She was receiving and singing for a few friends. It was a piece René had last heard when with Bethesda in London, and now, when his anxiety and fears had grown with every mile of the long journey, these familiar tones struck through him a shivering discord.

He asked to see Mrs. Conover an instant, pencilling it on the back of his card. She came out immediately, and urged him to enter, but he excused himself as not suitably attired.

"Can you tell me if Miss Conover has heard from America as to the health of Miss Hamilton?" he asked, then, in a well-schooled voice.

Mrs. Conover's face grew grave and grieved, as she replied:

"Yes; a letter came from Mrs. Trescott yesterday. Miss

Hamilton is hardly to be expected to live, I fear. She was such a sweet girl, too! Mrs. Trescott wrote hastily, and in great distress. It will be a terrible blow to her. If you will call to-morrow Guinevere will let you read the letter," she added gently, somewhat recognising in the sudden pallor and gray lips of M. d'Isten the shock she had given.

"Thank you," he contrived to say. "At what hour may I hope——?"

"At eleven, if you like."

He bowed, not daring to trust himself to speak further, and left the house. The coolness and darkness were a temporary relief to him, and he hurried away out of the sound of that haunting, horrible song.

She *was* a sweet girl! This putting it in the past tense was unendurable. And how could Bethesda's friend sing when, perhaps—it was true?

He set his teeth and walked on. The cabman followed him, clamouring for his pay. René looked up finally, as one might at the buzz of an insect, and then remembered that he had left his portmanteau containing the precious package of letters in the carriage. He sprang in, seized the handles, and held them tight during the drive to his hotel. They had been looking for him, and now the servants rushed out to assist him, and madame, seeing his stern, tense face, exclaimed:

"Oh, I hope, Monsieur le Comte, that Madame la Comtesse——"

"She is well," was the short reply, and, waving away the servants, he hastened upstairs.

This house! this room! this furniture! The fire burning as if she had been there to welcome him!

For a moment a whirling sensation came in his brain, and the past returned so vividly that the present was blotted out, and he conceived himself as just waiting for Bethesda to enter. A fitful smile played around his lips as he turned towards the door, and a vague, pleased look came in his eyes. At that moment he was close upon the borders of insanity.

Then the whirl came again, and when it left him he was returned to the bitter, despairing present. With a groan he flung his arm over the table, and his head fell upon it, the spring of life apparently broken.

Presently, however, he sprang up. She was alive; she

could not be dead ; and why was she so ill ? For love of him ! She might be dying, because to give him up was synonymous with giving up life. She had rated her strength too high. That fragile form could not bear the stress of such emotions, and such a sacrifice. It was too much to ask of a human being. It was wrong ! it was wicked ! (He was pacing the floor now.) Perhaps she had never received his letter ; probably not. She had been prostrated before it could reach her, and Mabel had in all likelihood destroyed it. His beloved would not know that he was endlessly devoted to her ; that nothing either in heaven or hell could detach him from her ! And she was dying for want of this knowledge. Mabel had done it ; Mabel had held the knife, and cut the throat of this willing victim. "Mabel," he said, slowly and aloud, "Mabel shall have her reward." She had promised to send him word, to telegraph him, if Béthesda were ever ill unto death, and had she kept her promise ? Of course not ! Who could expect her to keep a promise ? he laughed bitterly, although she considered the promises made to her binding in life and in death. There was no sort of justice in it. There was no justice in the world ! else why should his heart's whole treasure lie dying there, and he stand impotent, delirious, here ?

Something must be done.

He thought no farther then, but bathed his head, threw open a window, and, seeing his dense pallor in a mirror he passed, bethought him of a glass of wine.

He seated himself then, outwardly composed, but his whole inner being was a raging fire. He struggled to keep it under, as one would the flames that threatened those one was trying to rescue. He bent the whole force of his intellect and energy of his nature to the aim of finding some means of aiding his dying one, so many miles away.

Should he go to her ?

He feared it would be useless. Were she still alive when the interminable journey was over he would not be admitted to her side. Even through Marcot he could not reach her. Her sister or her aunts would be watching with her day and night, and Mrs. Trescott had prejudiced every one against him ; she had said as much in her letters. Perhaps, too, Béthesda could not endure the sudden revulsion of seeing him, and what could he say ? Only that he was hers for life and death, to dispose

of as she chose, and she had settled that question already. She knew, without his assurance, that her wishes would be obeyed.

If he could not go to her, what then?

Telegraph? Write? Through Marcot a word from him might reach her. What should that word be? What could it be, except a repetition of what she already knew, unless his conditions should change? Well, were they inflexible? A divorce was impossible; the church had taken care of that. Besides, he shrank from such a thing with an unconquerable repugnance. So, he knew, would Béthesda. Then, there was nothing he could do?

A thought, a wild, romantic thought! To go to America, to take Marcot's place! To see her, to wait upon her; sometime, perhaps, to slip a little word into her ear of encouraging devotion!

The possibility glittered before him like an enchantment. Who could tell what his mere presence might do for her? He would take such exquisite care of her, and he could act his part so well! He pored over this suggestion, amplified it into the minutest details, imagined his actions, his self-control, his foiling discovery, until he was almost resolved upon immediately undertaking it. Then suddenly came the question: "Would *she* like it?" and his fairy structure fell into abject demolition.

For she would not. As soon as the first surprise and joy were past, her conscience, of whose strength he had some knowledge now, would disapprove, and he would be adding to her trials instead of decreasing them. She would send him away, whatever it cost her, and tell him to return to Louise.

Louise—he had not thought of her. But she was to be considered; yes, decidedly to be considered. They had commenced a new life; the future, with patience, promised more than the past had ever done, and this was through his saint's ministrations. Louise must not be disregarded, nor Béthesda's commands to actively help her.

As he reached this conclusion, which surrendered him to a sense of his incapacity and weariness, a servant knocked, and said a gentleman waited below who had already called twice, while monsieur the count was absent.

"His name?"

The gentleman declined to give a name, but begged to assure monsieur the count that it was most important they should

meet. René was about to dismiss the man impatiently, when the thought suggested itself: If he should come from Béthesda?

"Tell him he may enter," were his immediate words.

He went into the next room and removed the traces of his journey hastily. When he returned to the *salon*, there, bending over a book, was a man he had good cause to know. A messenger from Béthesda indeed! It was the lover of Louise.

His guest turned and saw him as the scorn of this thought flashed across his features.

"Monsieur!" exclaimed the young officer hastily, while his face suffused with a most unmilitary blush, "believe you see in me only one who desires to render you a service in token of his gratitude."

"You owe me nothing," said M. d'Isten coldly.

"Pardon; I owe you what a soldier values more than his life—his reputation."

A fine smile just touched M. d'Isten's lip, but—

"To what am I indebted for this visit, sir?" was all he said.

"To an earnest desire to serve you," replied the soldier eagerly. "I have a piece of information which I am convinced you will value. It should be for you alone." He glanced as he spoke at the open door through which M. d'Isten had entered.

"We are alone. I cannot imagine what you would say, but be seated," said René, with careless politeness. "I have an engagement shortly; until then I listen."

The young officer bit his lip. This was haughty treatment; presently he should have the pleasure of seeing it change.

"If your time is brief, monsieur, pray allow me to put aside ceremony." M. d'Isten bowed. "You were married in the chapel of the Château d'Espinères."

"I believe you were a witness," returned M. d'Isten, with a touch of ironical disdain. It caused a hot flush to sting his companion's face, under the impulse of which he exclaimed abruptly:

"I witnessed, perhaps, a ceremony, but no marriage."

René looked up and down the stalwart form before him. Was the man mad? Or—could it be that a private marriage had taken place between Louise and this man before the "ceremony," as he called it? Impossible. Louise would long since

have flown to her lover had this been true. And yet—her words, that she could free herself and him.

He looked up sharply.

“Explain yourself,” he said.

“It has been a strange thing to me, monsieur,” began the officer, now more at ease, “that during these many years of what you thought marriage, you have never discovered that the ceremony was illegal, and that you are not the husband of Louise Mandéras.”

“Be careful, sir! Remember that the honour of the lady you mention has been long in my keeping, and I may add—to you—that I have kept it well. What proofs can you bring of this curious assertion? How have you convinced yourself that my marriage was illegal?”

“By acquaintance with the simple facts that the father of your supposed bride was a Spaniard, which made his daughter a Spaniard, and that you are a Frenchman. Facts equally well known to you, undoubtedly, but what has strangely escaped you is that for a Frenchman to marry a foreigner, on foreign soil, is illegal, and the union is void according to law.”

A pause. What a revelation for René! What a possibility! It staggered him for a moment, then:

“These are assertions only, sir; what are your proofs?”

The officer rose and took from the table a bulky volume he had brought. It was marked at a certain page, and he handed it to M. d'Isten in silence.

René read. It was true. This was a volume of the Code, and here it was in formal language—the incantation which broke his fetters to Louise and left him free.

The shock stunned him. The miraculous overthrow of accustomed conditions, the possibilities flashing like lightning about him, the incredulity of surprise confounded by proof, all combined to blur his mind. He could not tell if it were pain or pleasure he felt; he was sure it was confusion.

He had enough presence of mind to keep his face under control, so that even the curious eyes before him could read little of what passed within; but now he rose and walked to the window, and stood there a few moments.

Louise not his wife? What was she, then? What was he? Bethesda's spirit asked; he, who had prided himself on his untarnished life. They could both be retrieved by an instant

marriage now ; but—to marry her whom he had so long felt a burden, from whom, hardly an hour ago, he was longing to be free that he might give himself wholly to Béthesda, and now to make use of his new conditions only to put himself back into those old ones, and, in so doing, to deny Béthesda, perhaps to kill her ?

But this was no time for such questions. What was he going to say to that young man there ? Hum ; he would test him.

He turned and walked slowly back to the table. The officer was watching him with an assumption of deference, under which some triumph lurked. René d'Isten met his eyes with the most probing of glances.

"Since when have you known this, monsieur ?"

"Not long, Monsieur le Comte ; only since you brought Mademoiselle Mandéras——"

"Call her by the name she has so long worn, if you please," interrupted René haughtily.

"Since you and *your wife*, then, monsieur, came to Paris. If I had known before that, I fear I should have given you trouble." He smiled in a manner René at once pronounced odious.

"What was your object in telling me this ?" he asked sternly.

"As I have had the honour to inform you I wished to pay off somewhat of the debt of obligation you have laid upon me. It is a debt of honour, sir."

"And you thought you would be doing me a *favour*," a fine scorn in the word, "to tell me that what I have regarded as a sacred obligation for years is not of a feather's value ?"

"I had reason to believe, monsieur, that the knowledge of your freedom would not be unwelcome to you."

"You dared to think——"

"Pardon, monsieur," interrupted the officer hardily ; "your ceaseless watching of me has not been entirely unreciprocated. I knew you had met a lady whom——"

"Beware of touching such a subject even in your thoughts !" interrupted M. d'Isten sternly. "This matter is a most distasteful one ; let us finish it. Be so kind as to answer me a question. Are you aware if my—if Louise knows this law ?"

"She has never known of it from me, monsieur, nor has she given me any occasion to suspect that she knew it."

"Thanks. We need not deny that we are both familiar with the fact that you loved her, and that, had you been able, you would have snatched her away at any time——"

"Before last March ; not since," interposed his companion, with a bow. "I was too deeply in your debt."

"Very well," with an impatient gesture ; "before last March, then. Now I ask you, as man to man, did you, knowing she was free, seek her honourably ? Would you, if you had the opportunity, marry her to-morrow ?"

He turned his penetrating glance full upon his interlocutor, and under its blaze the man's bold eyes fell. He could not, without a sense of shame, speak here what had seemed to him a matter of course elsewhere. But the remembrance of this reassured him. He recovered himself, and gave a short laugh, which caused his answer to be almost unneeded.

"Really, monsieur, your offer sounds magnanimous, but I am hardly prepared to sacrifice my honour to marry an unwedded wife."

Then René d'Isten drew himself up, and looked every inch the aristocrat.

"I understand. You would woo her to dishonour, dishonouring yourself no less ; you were ardent in that, because the world would not point its finger at you, and cry : Shame ! But now—let me finish, if you please, sir—now, when the opportunity is offered you to say if you would shelter under your name the woman you pretend to love, you become finical and dainty. I am glad to know what your love is worth ; I have wasted much good sympathy upon you. But I should not have looked for anything different. It is like you, brave soldier that you are !"

"Monsieur !"

"Your precious 'honour' I saved once, because my wife desired it. It was not worth it. Allow me to bid you good-evening."

"I shall have the pleasure, then, at last, of sending you my second. I brook no insults, sir."

"Spare yourself the trouble. I shall receive no second. I do not fight—certainly not with one who has proved himself base. Adieu."

The officer strode up close to the haughty count, and looked in his face insolently. In one hand was his glove. He

was about to raise it, when a better thought struck him, a finer insult.

"Which shall *you* marry?" he sneered, and with a coarse laugh he turned on his heel and left the room.

CHAPTER X.

"Break, O break this bitter silence ! speak unto me once again !
Tell me, shall I ere behold thee ? tell me, do I wait in vain ?
It is well for us to suffer, it is well for us to wait,
Well to swing, like little children, all our life on death's loose gate."
J. MILLER HAGEMAN.

EXACTLY at eleven the next morning M. d'Isten presented himself at Miss Conover's door. She had been prepared by her mother to find him much changed, but his appearance shocked her. She wondered why he should look so ill. She held a letter in her hand, and after the first grave courtesies were exchanged, she gave it to him, turning away while he read it, with an instinctive consideration.

He went over it again and again, until he knew it by heart ; not for that end, but because it was so hopeless. Bethesda was day and night either insensible or in excruciating pain, wrote Mrs. Trescott. His Esda ! his fragile love ! Did he go to her now it would only be to find her beyond the reach of sorrow or consolation.

At last Miss Conover, vaguely alarmed, went forward and spoke his name. He turned, and she put out her hand impulsively :

"Ah, it is a sorrow to you also, monsieur."

He could not reply, but bent over her hand in silence. Presently, however, the sympathy of a common grief somewhat loosened the tense cords around his heart, and she could catch a glimpse of the reverential tenderness with which he regarded Bethesda, and which, for the time being, caused him to forget all else.

Evra did not think to be indignant. The perception of the agony it must be to this man not to have a shred of communication at such a time forced itself in upon her, and she was compassionate towards him. Her Lily had thought him worthy of her friendship, and she would be his friend now.

After this M. d'Isten visited Miss Conover frequently, each day looking more worn and haggard, for the news from America continued to be of the worst,—that is, when there was any news. The long suspense between the scraps Mabel and Marcot wrote was the hardest of all to bear. The two yearning friends came even to look upon the hour when they should hear of Bethesda's death as one of relief, for then she would no longer be suffering these agonies, too painful to be imagined, and they would be out of the clutches of a despairing hope.

A gnawing indecision also wore upon René. He had been to a lawyer, and convinced himself beyond any further doubt that he was free. But free to do what? He was surprised at himself that the matter was so difficult of solution. A year before he would have thought this release a God-sent justice, and accepted it as such. Now he could not help but think of Louise's cruel position, and her claims paramount almost to his own. Conscience, once awakened by contact with Bethesda's, could not again be lulled to sleep. He found himself in the terrible situation of divided forces. To which did he owe himself? To her who held his heart, or to her whom he had called wife? Was body more than soul? Did the fact of his having been the husband of Louise condemn him to marry her now? Did he not rather owe it to Bethesda that his new-found freedom should be laid at her feet? But then perhaps already she was beyond any joy he could give her, beyond hope, beyond—could she be beyond love?

Her illness served Bethesda well with René, and also with Guinevere, whose jealous nature had at times been aroused by the sight of anguish greater even than her own. But she could never censure Bethesda. This distant martyr, who might at any instant become—might already have become—a soul in heaven, it was impossible to associate with angry, or jealous, or sensuous thoughts. This body mangled in the conflict, although so dear to each, was seen to be as nothing to the strength of that ardent spirit which soared above it and them. They heard of her patience and fortitude, her unselfishness and spirituality, and they felt that she was a being bound so slightly to earth that the touch of a rough or unworthy thought might break the chrysalis, and leave her to soar white-winged to God.

They were both Catholics, and many times they might have been seen, if not at the same church, at the same hour praying

for her whose body might be alive or dead. For René had found that there was something more powerful to pray to than Esda. His saint was enough for him, but when she needed intercession, whom was there to go to but God?

And when he left the holy shadow of the church he would go home to write to Louise kindly, solicitously : showing an unusual tenderness as of one about to go away for ever. He left the matter in God's hands. If his prayers were answered, and Béthesda recovered, he would go to her and leave Louise. Spirit was stronger than matter, soul more divine than body, love the truest law. So, whatever it cost Louise, Béthesda should not miss her rights. She had never done anything to cause her to miss them. Louise had ; and yet he never felt so forgiving and lenient to Louise as when he was caressing the idea of Béthesda's recovery.

What made his thoughts especially gentle with her who had been his wife was the fact that, through one whom he had trusted for many years, he learned that the doughty officer, who had so eagerly sought to pay off a "debt of gratitude," had returned to M——, and tried to meet Louise where he could speak to her alone. Failing in that, as René had long since taken care he should fail, he sent her a letter saying that a word from him could free her from bonds she had long endured, and that could he gain an interview with her for only one moment, this word should be spoken, and her heart assured that his devotion was as unceasing as it had been patient.

Louise had received this letter through some clever intrigue which had prevented the trusty friend from securing it *en route*, but it had done little harm, for *it had not been opened*. It was returned by Louise herself to its writer, whom it was allowed to reach, and who had almost immediately left the place.

"My poor, dear Louise !" said René to himself, as he folded the letter containing this news. He felt very tenderly towards her as one does towards a child who has been naughty and unmanageable, but who is receiving hard punishment. Poor child ! it would go hard with her. And this fellow was a dastard.

This news only made him more eager for decisive word from America. Such upheaval and suspense were peculiarly unendurable to him. He was unable to adjust himself to anything, without the likelihood of being thrown off his balance at the next instant. He was the plaything of fate, the buffet of chance.

But this fate and chance would have a divine hand to impel them, and he would abide its decision. If Béthesda died, hope was for ever shut to him. He could sacrifice himself in a perpetual suttee and find it sweet, because she would approve. Louise should know what this "word of freedom" was, and choose him or reject him with open-eyed knowledge. But he could do nothing till he heard from Béthesda. His whole soul came back to this centre of longing. Let her recover, and then—happiness!

One day towards the end of March, however, Guinevere received word that the end could be only a few hours delayed. Beth even then was lying in a swoon which had lasted for hours, and from which, the physicians said, she would awake only to a few moments' consciousness before she died. They were willing she should go; the persecuted child would be safer there, wrote Mabel. No love, not the most devoted, could shield so tender a soul in this wicked world. Since there were demons here who delighted in inflicting torture on the best, her friends could only be glad of her release.

The paper fluttered from Guinevere's fingers and fell to the floor. She had not understood the last phrases: she had only felt that there was no longer suspense nor hope.

As she knelt before the crucifix hanging by her bed, a knock came at the door. Was it the final tidings?

"Monsieur le Comte d'Isten craves to see mademoiselle," said the maid.

"Give him this, and say I cannot see him," said Guinevere, thrusting Mrs. Trescott's letter into the girl's hand, and enclosing herself again with her solitary grief.

"Mademoiselle is in despair, monsieur," said the maid presently in the next room; "she sends you this, and says she is too ill to see you. She——"

M. d'Isten had not heard her. He snatched the meaning from the blotted page before him, and when he realised what it meant, the maid shrank away from before his face and closed the door stealthily.

The insuperable loss came upon him with a fierceness which quite obliterated his reason. He laid all the blame on Mabel, and the desire for vengeance coming from his mother's race made him reckless then. His was the wrath which does not explode but kills. An explosion may injure many, but the bullet flies surer to the one heart.

A few hours later he returned—he had rushed out of the house—with a new resolution in his face. He insisted on seeing Miss Conover; bribed the maid conclusively, and gave her such an adroit message to deliver that the artist's seclusion was ended; and she hastened into the drawing-room, her hair dishevelled, and her cheeks all tear-stained and wan.

"What is it, what is it?" she cried.

"I am convinced Béthesda is better. Send a telegram to her sister and sec. She will answer it; I know she will."

"There is no use; my darling is dead!" moaned disappointed Guinevere.

"She is not. Trust me, Miss Conover. Only telegraph, and you will see that I am right. Miss Margaret Hamilton will answer you; she might not me. I beseech you, try."

"As you like, but it will only be to hear of her death."

Consent was all M. d'Isten wished. Action was always a relief to him, and to whom is not hope a tonic? He spoke a few helpful words, borne up by an unreasoned feeling which would not acknowledge fear, and left Guinevere roused to hope also. He haunted the office until the reply came, late at night.

"She lives. We have hope."

The blackness was passed. Such a dark period could not come again; it would always be illumined by the reflection of this relief.

Miss Conover gave him both hands as she saw his face and heard the good words which verified his hope.

"My sweet, living Lily!" thought Evra, when M. d'Isten left, a great change in his face and carriage and voice, "we both love you, but I will support and comfort you. He cannot, and I can. I am a woman and so you will not fear me."

And René, walking under the starry spring skies, thinking of a year before, and the resurrection promised to-night, made a vow that he would win Béthesda to the resurrection of love as of life, without allowing her happiness to be flawed by the knowledge that it caused any one pain.

CHAPTER XI.

“Ask God for truth and He will give the divine in answer.”

Peace comes, not by having naught to suffer, but by surmounting suffering.

EIGHTEEN months passed. Bethesda Hamilton had very slowly recovered from the terrible illness which had almost released her soul. What turned the trembling balance was a perception of her cowardice in wishing, as she had done at first, to die. Should she be so selfish as to extinguish the light her fiery sufferings might be to some other erring souls? She must live to make her pains and her gains a beacon off the rocks of dishonour and to the haven of morality.

Her first thought now became in each new trial: How can I make this serve others? She constantly sought truth, no longer for herself alone; but a patient endurance, an active resignation, an offering of all her joys and sorrows to the service of her fellow-men, brought their own sublime reward. It was worth the whole of her illness in its hope alone; it was the gladness of the birth of things immortal; for in her soul was that grandest of all conceptions, the belief in a loving personal God.

The great upreaching of her soul after truth and rectitude had been but the dawn which heralds the approach of day, and presently she looked forward with an almost ecstatic vision to the time when the world should be purified of its sins, and the Christian religion be comprehended in reverence, as well as felt by faith, until no side of its divine beauty would be dim, but all believed with that assurance which is beyond faith, because it knows.

Naturally, for she was still a weak woman, there were desolate hours when the uplifting pinions of aspiration and hope drooped helpless at her sides, their snowy plumage hardly withheld from the dust; when her passionate nature cried out for her lover and would not be stilled. She remembered, and memory's very sweetness was well-nigh unendurably bitter. For there are many broken threads which seem but a hand's-breadth apart, yet the chasm which separates them is deep as death, and wide as eternity.

But the strong instinct of Bethesda's nature towards right as of a plant towards light, always won the victory, and she recognised how only the oblivion of ourselves in a higher life than our own makes us strong and serene; only advancing over the bridge which leads from passion to renunciation will take us from the malarious districts of individual life to the invigorating regions of universality.

She was aided in this by living constantly under the combined influences of Mrs. Stanhope and Margaret. Mabel, soon after Bethesda's recovery, had married; not loving nor professing to love, but glad to be "surely first to some one," as she said, and feeling that she could make her husband happier than he would be without her.

He was in every particular her counterpart. He was a self-poised and strong man, and upon first meeting attracted Bethesda's confidence. She saw that, with time, his consistent force and intrepid devotion might subdue Mabel's impetuous inconsistencies, and give the equipoise which she so much needed both for development and happiness. His love for Mabel, if not wholly wise, was neither a blind infatuation. He had weighed his chances with a not unsteady hand, and had thrown his whole fortune on the hope of winning her absolutely some day. He had seen that to do this irrevocability was essential. The inevitable, which she had never dared to face, should be her possessor, and hold her for once firm to a purpose—his purpose, if not hers. When there was once a solidarity of interests declared between them, her lifelong instincts would play into his hands.

So they had married and gone to their new home in California, "so far west that it is almost east," said Mabel; but there were only a few swift months for Mr. Reming to use in accomplishing his hoped-for end, when Mabel, in giving birth to a girl-baby, died. Bethesda was there and supported her aunt to the last, and it was to her Mrs. Reming left her child. The father was quite willing to carry out the mother's request, for he almost hated the infant which had stolen his precious wife's life. He had, indeed, at once gone away on a long trip, sailing direct to China, whence there was little prospect as yet of his returning.

The Misses Hamilton, meantime, with their new charge, had decided to take the house and grounds adjoining the Stanhopes',

and towards the end of the second October they were settled in their own establishment, with Aunt Agatha at hand to call upon, and the lives of all flowing in that sympathetic unison which forms the sweetness of life.

To Bethesda, such an experience as her present one of quiet domesticity was peculiarly restful. The longer she lived in the natural conditions of life, the more shudderingly did she look back on the unsheltered past and rejoice that it was over. When she had first recovered from her illness she had thought there must be an impenetrable strangeness which would separate her, like a nun's veil, from the society in which she moved; but the foolish notion vanished under the clear rays of common-sense and contact with the world in its usual phases which Mrs. Stanhope had exerted herself to bring around her nieces.

Bethesda soon found that her charms were here neither sought by artists to copy, nor the cause of despair to mad lovers. A certain equipoise of character, which increased daily under the healthy *régime* of her moral surroundings, and interest rather in thought than persons, sufficed to keep on the boundaries of pleasant acquaintance the men who were attracted to her. Moreover, there was a sense of completion about her which robbed her of the charm a fancy-free maidenhood alone possesses. Men found her interested by larger questions than mere personal ones, and the magnetism which formerly drew to love, now drew to intellectual attainment.

She thought much, and had never had such opportunities to bring out the best in her as during the winter, when the philosophic and literary conversations which made Mrs. Stanhope's parlour an old time *salon*, stimulated her to activity, while giving her the guidance of noble minds. She would listen and glow with the exercise of her highest faculties now, as she had used to do in beholding fine scenery, and felt her insignificance beside these towering intellects, as she had beside the Pyramids.

At present objective life was all her study, for her personal strength and attention were required for the baby and Margaret, whose health had been strained by the long nursing, and who clung to her sister with that close pressure which best staunches a wound. And Bethesda felt that no looking back with sorrow, nor forward with apprehension, must sap the health which was dedicated to the serving of others.

Her manner of regarding the past was thus significantly altered. She had heard nothing from René since the telegram whose contents had been communicated to her when it was thought that she would die. The words had often reassured her. René and Louise might even at this moment be living together in Paris, realising that "he only earns his life who daily conquers it anew." This was her most hopeful thought. Of René's letter and Madame d'Isten's she knew nothing. They had been received by Mabel and disposed of as she saw fit. Bethesda often wondered if Louise were angry, but patiently bore the lack of knowledge, feeling that all she could do had been done. She understood that she must recognise clearly René's errors and her own, and reach upwards to touch him only as she embraced all, he being farthest of all. She was sure that God would take care of René as of herself with perfect tenderness, upholding them if they did right, leading them to repentance if they did wrong, which was not a lesser reliance. She did not wish herself or others to escape any suffering it were better they should have. Had she felt God would extend a mercy to her to cover instead of eradicating her sins, she would not have trusted him as she did. Meantime she knew that, if she gave her life into his hands, he would convert all her evil into good, by the divine alchemy of his regenerative power.

In the latter part of October Mr. Stanhope returned from a trip to New York, and mentioned incidentally having met a gentleman who seemed to know Bethesda.

"He is the new French Secretary of Legation in Washington, I understand. It may be he has only heard your name in connection with your writing,—those stories of yours have made some sensation, my dear,—but I formed an opinion that he had met you personally."

"Who was he?" asked Bethesda steadily, though her heart answered before him.

"His name was d'Isten. I have his card somewhere. He had a title of some kind; it seems to me they said marquis. Do you know him?"

"Aunt Mabel and I met him abroad," replied Bethesda calmly. "Was his wife with him?"

"His wife? No, I did not know he had one. That is natural enough, however," he went on after a momentary pause.

"A man does not say much of private affairs to a stranger. I did not mention that you were any connection of mine, only that I had heard of you. He seemed interested in what I did say. He admires your writings, and, if I am not mistaken, said he had translated one of the stories into their French Magazine—what do you call it?"

"*Revue des Deux Mondes*?"

"Yes. He seemed to have literary tastes, and had a number of anecdotes to tell about literary persons. He was quite entertaining, but too foreign to suit me. I don't see how you and Mabel managed to live so long over there."

The new secretary of legation was soon forgotten. Even Bethesda succeeded in silencing, for the time, the importunate voice within her which she had not fancied could clamour so loudly for itself alone after months of victorious subjection.

For it had been many months, many years it seemed to her as she lay awake that night, since that Christmas when her decision to deny herself and René all, had been made. It was more than two years since they had met, and once more they were on the same side of the Atlantic. What did this mean? A hundred perturbing possibilities suggested themselves as unfoldings of the present. Deeds draw an endless chain of consequences; what was the next link which would come to her?

Finally Bethesda put the thoughts all aside, as the dawn came creeping in. She remembered what Mrs. Stanhope had said to her once:

"The course of events cannot be disturbed, nor evaded. Do as near right as you can, and leave the rest to God."

She sent for Marcot the next day, and asked him to give her back the paper with which she had entrusted him before she was ill.

"It is impossible for me to do so at once, madame," he replied, "I left it with a banker in New York."

"Why so? When was that?"

"Before madame your aunt was married, madame. Perhaps Madame Reming communicated to my mistress a rebuke she gave me? She wished to discharge me."

"I have heard of it." There had indeed been a stiff battle between Mabel and Agatha on this subject, but Agatha had won.

"My mistress will understand that then the surest way of fulfilling her wishes was to put the paper out of my hands."

"Very well. I have no doubt you did it for the best. Send for it now, however, and give it to me immediately."

"My mistress has not lost confidence in me?" ventured Marcot humbly.

"Not in the least. You have been devoted to me and my interests. Those papers were only given you to deliver in case of my speedy death. I now wish to have them again myself."

"As my mistress desires," said Marcot obediently, but he lingered.

"Have you anything to say to me?" asked Miss Hamilton presently.

"If my mistress would permit,—it may be of service to my mistress to know that the person whose name was on her letter is in America."

"Very well. You have done your duty in telling me, and now I wish you to consider it your duty not to mention him again. That is all I shall want of you now."

It was a week after she had received and destroyed the sealed paper she had requested, and which contained all René's letters to her, as well as one from her to him, none of which, she was sure, had been tampered with, that there came a call at the telephone from Mr. Stanhope.

Mrs. Stanhope was away, and Uncle Raleigh on such occasions took his meals with his nieces, feeling perfectly at home there. Now he asked, with customary formality, if he could bring up a friend to dine. The answer was: "Certainly," but in a few moments another call was made, and Bethesda asked for.

"It is the gentleman I told you of meeting in New York. He has excellent letters from Washington, and I would like to offer him some hospitality. Do you object in any way to his coming to your house?"

Bethesda felt all the blood leave the surface of her body, and crowd to her heart. For an instant she could not speak or move. It had, in spite of all, taken her completely by surprise. She had not imagined him as making so bold a stroke.

"Please postpone the invitation," she contrived at last to say.

"Very well," replied Mr. Stanhope, and closed the current.

Bethesda went into the study, and sat down at her desk and let her head fall on her hands. What was she to do?

What could she say that would not be unjust, and yet would keep them separated? For this had become the one urgent aim, excluding all others. She could not see him unless she knew more, it was her duty not to meet him; and, moreover, she *could* not.

Then she felt Margaret's arms around her, the visible presence of tender sympathy.

"Margaret," she said abruptly, for she had no secrets from her sister, "Monsieur d'Isten is in the city. He has letters of introduction to uncle, and was to have come here to dine to-night. I asked uncle to postpone it, so as to give me at least time to think. Now, what am I to do?"

"Uncle will trust you without a word of question. You have only to say you do not wish to meet M. d'Isten."

"But the question is, What does it mean? He comes here without his wife; he has excellent letters of introduction to uncle, and what does it mean? What, rather, can I do to keep him away?"

"You must keep him away by some means, that is sure, but I don't think anything more than an expression of your desire not to meet him will be necessary. Aunt Agatha will be home to-morrow, and then she can entertain him, and uncle will take delicate care of you; he would respect your least wish."

"True, and how good it is to be protected, to be sheltered! I understand better now that I have spoken to you. It startled me so at first, I could hardly think."

Mr. Stanhope did not mention M. d'Isten's name until Bethesda first inquired about him, which was after Marcot had placed the dessert upon the table. She was looking peculiarly lovely to-night, thought her uncle, although a little tired; but her voice was quite natural as she mentioned his message.

"By whom was M. d'Isten introduced?" she asked.

"By Mr. —, an old friend of mine in the cabinet. He writes in the highest terms of this Frenchman, whom, it seems, he knew in Paris on some diplomatic business. Here is the letter. Read it after dinner. He says any attentions given to him would be considered as a personal favour. M. d'Isten has made a powerful friend there."

"Has he, indeed?" exclaimed Margaret, with frank curiosity. "Who then is this remarkable man? Is he young or old? Married or single? Have you seen him here?"

Mr. Stanhope glanced at Bethesda in some surprise ; she had not told her sister then ? He answered readily, however :

“He brought me the letter and stayed some time in my office. He is well-bred and intelligent, but a reserved man, I should say. He seems desirous to please. If he is married he did not say so ; I should have liked him better if he had. I should have preferred, too, his mentioning Bethesda, since he met her abroad, and probably learned in Washington that I was her uncle. I like a man who isn't afraid to claim acquaintance with anybody. However, with such a letter I should like to pay him some attention.”

He looked at Bethesda keenly. She said nothing for a moment, then lifted inscrutably candid eyes to his face, and replied in a low, steady voice :

“Uncle, you know Aunt Mabel and I became acquainted with Monsieur d'Isten abroad. We liked him very much for a time, then there came up a—a misunderstanding, I will call it, and the acquaintance was entirely broken off. Aunt Mabel never forgave him, and, although I think she was unjust to him, I am not sufficiently well satisfied with his actions, or our own, to wish to meet him—now. You might tell him that you would be glad to invite him here, but I had asked you not to do so. Yes, this would be best, I think it would make him clearly understand, and would avert our meeting in the future.”

There was an uncontrollable sadness in her voice now which stirred both her listeners. Mr. Stanhope filled her glass with wine, and his hand trembled in so doing. To cover it he said quickly :

“Just as you choose. There is no need for me to mention you at all, if you prefer.”

“Yes, you had better say I requested this of you, unless it would be awkward for you ?”

“Oh no ; if you think it best, I can easily manage it. I told him when your message came that I was obliged to delay the dinner, and that I would call at his hotel in the morning. I can give him your message then, although not in the form of one of course, and, at the same time, tell him I expect my wife home at noon, and ask him to dine with us the next day. That will be all right. You need not worry at all.”

It was a quiet but hard evening to Bethesda. Neighbours

came in, and they sat talking in the library where Bethesda herself had closed the lower shutters which Marcot, for one reason or another, had left open.

As they went away, quite late, Bethesda stood a few moments in the balmy, Indian-summer air, looking up at the stars which had so often seemed to watch her destiny. So, he was a marquis. Well, his father had been an old man two years before, but it must have been a deep grief to the son. He loved his father. And his wife? Those were the two ties which held him bound to Europe, he had once told her, and now he was here——

A man's figure stirred under the trees opposite. She turned hastily and went in.

CHAPTER XII.

"Our life is lent
From first to last, the whole, for this experiment,
Of proving what I say,—that we ourselves are true!"

ROBERT BROWNING.

THAT same evening Marcot stood before his former master, betokening by profuse salutations his pleasure at again being able to speak with one whom he had loved from boyhood.

"Has your mistress mentioned me in your hearing?" were René d'Isten's first words when the delighted greetings had been received, and very pleasantly too.

"It is just now that she called me and gave me a warning, monsieur le marquis," replied Marcot. "She commanded me to carry no word, or letter, or message whatever from you to her, monsieur; she said that if I did so that moment would be my last in her service. Pardon me, monsieur le marquis, but you desire me to repeat her words?"

"Certainly; and you think she meant them?"

"She never uses such words idly, monsieur."

"Very likely not." He sat and thought a few moments in silence. Did this indicate disapproval? Or was it fear of herself as well as of him? In any case he could not but admire the position she took, knowing no more than she did.

"Sit down," he said presently to the man waiting before him. "Tell me all I should wish to know."

Thereupon ensued a tale which Bethesda would have been astounded to hear. Not that it was untrue; quite the contrary. So accurate had been the man's perceptions of all that came within his scope of mind, so acute his surmises, and so excellent his memory, that she would have felt her life unveiled of at least all its outer coverings before René d'Isten's keen eyes. Marcot was a kind of genius in his way; he would have made his fortune as a detective; his master had known and chosen well when he gave him this position of confidence.

He praised him now, and added a more convertible reward, and then asked carelessly:

"Did she appear to suspect anything about the letter you left with your so-called banker?"

"Nothing, monsieur le marquis. She has too white a soul to suspect."

"So you are thoroughly devoted to her, eh? Well, you are right, Marcot. I wish I could be in your place."

"She is the kindest of ladies, monsieur; I thank you for giving me so good a position."

"And she has no pretendants, you say?"

"None, monsieur. There are many who would gladly be so did she permit it, but there is an *air de reine* about her which prevents impertinence."

"Is she too delicate yet to bear a surprise?"

"Ah, monsieur, she is very frail! And she has suffered so much! No one who did not see her during that dreadful illness knows what woman can endure. Be careful of her, I beseech you, monsieur!"

"Tranquillise yourself, Marcot. She is in no danger from me." Then, with a knowledge of the man's French heart, he gave him the most salient bits of news from his home and people.

"And monsieur your father died——?"

"Only a short time since. He had a return of the old paralysis from his wounds, and was in constant danger of death, for which he came to pray. I was with him from the first. He spoke of you, Marcot, only the day before he died. You shall choose your own place on the estate when you have done what there is to do here, or if your mistress should dismiss you. I know I can trust you, but be discreet; don't run any risks. If she should question you—— She never has, you

say? Well, it may come, and then be careful what you say. I am here on diplomatic business, and shall remain indefinitely,—in America, I mean. I came to this city to make the acquaintance of her uncle. The circumstances of my life have changed, much changed. Specify my father's death if she presses you closely. Don't mention Madame d'Isten. If she asks for her, say you have heard nothing, but assure her, with significance, that my circumstances are altered. Come again to-morrow evening at this same hour, if possible. I expect to dine out, and may wish to give you new instructions. Leave the shutters open every evening; I saw your mistress close them to-night. She is taller than she was, and her hair seems darker. Has she changed much during her illness? I could not see her face."

"She is more beautiful than ever, monsieur le marquis. She has the serenity of a saint,—ah, you should have seen her, monsieur, with Madame Reming!—and her tenderness to that baby——"

"*Bien, bien*, Marcot. I see plainly that if a man cannot hope to be a hero to his valet, your mistress is nothing less than perfect to you! And I believe you are not far wrong."

The next day Mrs. Stanhope returned and found her husband so anxious to do something at once for this well-introduced stranger, that Aunt Agatha invited a hasty company to meet him that same evening, trusting to her nieces to help her in preparations.

"For although you do not wish to meet him there is no reason why he should not come to my house, is there, Bethesda?" she asked.

"None, I think, Aunt Agatha." Was he not as innocent as she who had made her home with Mrs. Stanhope?

Bethesda was very busy all the afternoon arranging the fruits and flowers on the table and in the parlours of her aunt's home. Marcot brought basket after basket of blossoms from the greenhouse, and she went from one room to another with the baby on her arm—the little May-Flower had been ailing the last day or two—leaving each a bower, hardly conscious of how much beauty she was causing. Indeed, it was not until the baby demanded undivided attention, and she seated herself in a low rocker to hush it to sleep, that she realised how she had lavished the wealth of a garden in decorations to honour the coming of a man she must never see.

Just as this thought came over her Mrs. Stanhope entered already dressed, and exclaimed at the lovely effect of the rooms.

"But you must go at once, dear. It is almost time for them to be coming. Here, nurse, take the baby, and call Miss Margaret."

Bethesda had hurried away at the first word, like a startled fawn, but stood in the western porch a moment waiting for her sister. Her white dress was caught up over one arm, and a red silk shawl was thrown around her shoulders; her hair was low in her neck, and her eyes, shadowed by weariness, were dark and brilliant.

René d'Isten coming up the pathway a little early discovered Bethesda standing there, the reflections of a warm sunset about her, alone. The implacable distance which had so long separated them seemed but a step to be trod in triumph before he should hold her to his heart.

Then Margaret joined her, and the two sped across the lawn, René's thirsty eyes following them. He dared not pursue; it would be only self-defeat.

He went up the steps and was immediately ushered into the garden Bethesda had made. He knew she had. He could feel the touches of her light fingers on every leaf and stem. There was her portrait, too, in the library. He had last seen it when——

"The Marquis d'Isten, I believe?" said a courteous voice near him, and turning he saw his hostess. "I am Mrs. Stanhope. I am sorry Mr. Stanhope is not here to welcome you. He was detained, but will be down immediately."

"It is my fault, madame. My coming was hastened too much, I perceive, by my great desire to meet you. I was just renewing my acquaintance with this beautiful portrait of one who has often spoken to me of Madame Stanhope. I trust Mademoiselle Hamilton is well?"

"Thanks, quite well. Be seated, pray. Have you been long in America?"

"Several weeks, madame. It has cost me much to be so long in a land where I flattered myself I might find friends and not seek them, but I was obliged to identify myself with my position before I could take this great pleasure. It grieves me deeply to learn that I may now never meet one who honoured me with her friendship, Madame Trescott, as I knew her."

“Did I understand you to say you were my sister’s friend?” inquired Mrs. Stanhope in a tone René thought icy.

“Indeed, madame, she never had one more devoted! Unhappily a misunderstanding arose, which I the more profoundly regret, as I find Miss Hamilton considers it her duty not to allow me the pleasure of seeing her, to which I had looked forward with eagerness. I assure you, madame, that no misunderstandings can ever eradicate from my heart sentiments of the greatest esteem for both your sister and your niece.”

He said this with much dignity, and an air penetrated with regret, but Mrs. Stanhope was not touched.

“You are kind,” she replied gravely. “If you please, however, we will not return to the past. Our acquaintance dates from to-day. I am pleased to be able to receive a gentleman so highly commended by Secretary C——.”

Mr. Stanhope here joined them, and other guests soon arrived. René d’Isten put aside all wounded pride and made himself as agreeable as he knew how to be, which is saying much. The impression he conveyed was most felicitous. His appearance was said to be distinguished; his manner perfection; his conversation brilliant without being obtrusive. His praise of America was both discriminating and warm; his knowledge of our institutions peculiarly accurate. Every one was charmed with him, even Mr. Stanhope, except the one he especially wished to win—“Aunt Agatha.”

The difference between the masculine and feminine was well marked here. The quite easy conjecture Raleigh Stanhope might have made as to the cause of Bethesda’s withdrawal from the society of this man did not once occur to him. To think of Bethesda in connection with anything not crystal-clear and pure would have seemed to any of her friends an unpardonable insult. But Mrs. Stanhope, with her more discerning eyes and intuitive perceptions, had discovered, not alone in Bethesda’s case, that the fault from which we consider others most exempt is probably the one they have fought the hardest. Only through battle can come that victory which is clothed in white raiment.

M. d’Isten also had been observing and planning swiftly. As he took his leave he said to his hostess:

“May I have the honour of calling upon you in the morning? My time is somewhat limited, or I would not intrude so soon after this delightful evening.”

"You have given it its success. I shall be at home, and glad to see you any time to-morrow after eleven."

When Margaret went to her room that evening, after a little chat with Aunt Agatha to hear of "this wonderful man," she found Bethesda sitting by the little Mary's crib patting her to sleep. The child had been restless, and Bethesda could always soothe her best. To Margaret there was a very pathetic touch in the simple picture then. The ways of Providence seemed almost more inscrutable to her than when she had seen Bethesda in the relentless clutches of physical agony. There are many losses for which death seems to compensate.

The next morning M. d'Isten presented himself promptly at Mrs. Stanhope's door. He had told the coachman to drive slowly, and, well back in the corner, had studied with the keenest eyes the adjacent house. On the porch was the little dot of humanity which he knew to be Mabel's child. Somebody was sitting in the shadow. He bent forward eagerly, but only to see the cap and apron of a nurse. Marcot was in the garden gathering flowers. As the carriage passed he glanced up carelessly at the windows of a room on the second floor. Behind the half-drawn curtains could be seen a figure with bent head, the shapely head René knew so well. So, she was writing. He dismissed his carriage at the gate. He preferred to walk back. Some opportunity might occur for—what?

The flowers in the shadowy parlours were drooping a little, but were still lovely, and down on them all looked the jasmine face of Esda. He had not liked the portrait in London; here he felt that he would give all he possessed in exchange for it, unless——

Again Mrs. Stanhope interrupted his contemplation. She greeted him with a fine reserve, which was exceedingly characteristic of the woman. Perhaps she felt it the more because there was a gravity in his manner now which ingratiated him in her favour.

With very little preamble he set before her the object of his visit. It was not alone one of courtesy, although he anticipated leaving soon, as he had told her; nor was it solely a desire to see again the sister of Madame Trescott and aunt of Miss Hamilton, although he was sure, he need not say, this would have brought him far; but there was a very serious purpose in his mind to which he ventured to hope she would listen with kindness.

"You come to me, then, on the understanding that I am to receive you as the chaperone of my niece Bethesda?"

He glanced at her with sudden scrutiny as she thus ignored her sister, but replied without delay :

"Precisely, madame. Miss Hamilton has often told me you were just, a quality so rare that one cannot over appreciate it. I appeal, madame, to your justice."

"I am willing to listen," said Mrs. Stanhope, after a moment's pause.

"May I then dare to ask you, madame——"

"You were to speak, not to question," returned Mrs. Stanhope, a smile hovering about her firm lips.

"I understand. Pray understand me also. I cannot speak as I would unless some one has spoken before me. Allow me to ask you, then, if you know of the cause of the alienation between Madame Trescott and myself?"

"I have never been told."

"But you surmise. *Bien*. I shall be unable to speak with the distinctness I would have chosen ; but I trust you will comprehend."

A silence ensued, during which Mrs. Stanhope studied him keenly. He was at once dignified and skilful ; he was a man of undeniably subtle power. What would he say ?

"Madame," he resumed at last, "this is a matter which touches to the fibres of my honour and my life. To Mr. Stanhope, who kindly gave me an opportunity for explanation, I could not speak. He had no suspicion of the truth. I need one who has, and, moreover, a woman, who can understand."

"I am not sentimental," remarked Mrs. Stanhope drily.

"I should have been blind to have supposed it," was the quick retort. "Nor is it to sentimentality that I wish to appeal ; no—only to the justice which Miss Hamilton assured me I should find in you."

"Proceed."

"When I first met your sister it was at a time when my own life was wrecked. The details are unnecessary, the fact is sufficient ; to me it was terrible. I had enjoyed several weeks of delightful companionship with your sister when a misunderstanding arose, which was afterwards, in Italy, explained to her satisfaction. I did not see Miss Hamilton until Mrs. Trescott had restored to me her approval, and asked me to come to the

house where they were staying on my return from Rome. I was charmed to do so, and there, very gradually, I became acquainted with Miss Hamilton. Immediately before leaving Florence I learned that Miss Hamilton wrote. At this juncture I was guilty of building an air-castle. I conceived the thought that I might prevail upon Miss Hamilton to take the efforts of my pen, which had never been of sufficient value to encourage me to brave the terrors of the press, and with her exquisite tact and feminine capacity work them over into a shape which might be of use to her and would be glory to me. In Paris I proposed this scheme; Miss Hamilton was gracious enough to accept it; Mrs. Trescott looked upon it with vague alarm."

"It should not have been vague," said Mrs. Stanhope decisively.

"You are right, madame. It was a dangerous experiment. I did not see it as such until the end came, and I was obliged to look back by the lurid light of suffering on what I had innocently proposed. That it was done innocently I do not know how I can persuade you, unless you believe my simple word. It may be small to you; to me it is all."

"There are times when thoughtlessness is a crime."

"True, madame. It has been punished as such."

He glanced appealingly, yet with dignity, at the face of his interlocutor. It was grave and silent. He resumed with an introverted earnestness:

"The end came as I leave you to imagine. I know you will do Miss Hamilton no injustice, and I hope you will not judge me with undue severity. The ladies returned to America. The conflict of customs, probably your wisdom, but more than all, I believe, her own inalienable sense of right brought recognition of the errors of the past. She benefited me as no one else could have done, but she suffered cruelly for her benevolence. Can you imagine what it was to me to hear of her tortures, and know that I—I—had helped to inflict them upon her?"

"Where was your wife?" asked Mrs. Stanhope, with chilling calm.

"I wrote to her to come to me. Miss Hamilton wrote her the same. She was unable to do so at the time, and I went to her. I told her all there was to tell. She preferred to still remain with her mother. I returned to Paris. Through a friend of Miss Hamilton's, to whom Mrs. Trescott occasionally

wrote, I heard of—of your niece's hopeless condition. Weeks of excruciating suspense followed. Just as they ended, by our hearing that you had hope, news came of my father's sudden prostration. I hastened to his side and nursed him through a long illness. When he died my mind could no longer bear the strain so long put upon it. I was for weeks in a condition of which I have no remembrance. When I recovered——”

“Madame ! madame !” cried Marcot, entering the room without ceremony. “The baby is in a convulsion. Miss Margaret begs you will come at once.”

“Excuse me,” said Mrs. Stanhope, already at the door, and vanished.

“Come to-night at ten without fail,” said M. d’Isten to Marcot. “No excuses ; you did your duty.”

Again Mabel, in the form of her child, had interfered ! Had this interview, then, been all in vain ? Should he never reach Béthesda ? he asked himself, as he walked slowly past the house where a sudden commotion prevailed. Béthesda was there, there ! and he could not see her !

He sent in the afternoon to inquire of the child's condition at Mrs. Stanhope's. It was better, but still very ill. She would be unable to see him for an indefinite period. But patience is a good palfrey ; she had served his turn before now ; he would ride her to the end.

He left the city that evening after new instructions to Marcot. His determination was only screwed tighter by these obstacles which impeded his lines of conduct. By some means he would win Béthesda's side, and thence he never doubted but that he could touch her heart.

CHAPTER XIII.

“Do what your heart tells you ; yes, Aspasia, do all it tells you. Remember how august it is : it contains the temple not only of Love, but of Truth, and a whisper is heard from the extremity of one to the extremity of the other. . . . May the beautiful feet of Aspasia stand firm !”—LANDOR.

SEVERAL weeks passed without Bethesda's hearing anything more of René d'Isten ; but they were not very calm ones to her. She was thankful to have been busy ; that was always a gain.

On the little May-Flower's recovery she had taken to writing in order to clarify her mind. In communion thus with her ideal could she always best form practical resolutions.

She knew that this pause was only preparative to an onslaught which would strive to be irresistible, and she thought deeply, looking on every side of the question which had anew come to her to solve. It was not without difficulty that at last she put all away from her except her own subjective knowledge, and tried to wait in peace.

One morning in December there came a letter from Guinevere containing the long-anticipated announcement that she was to sail immediately for New York, where she was to replace an inefficient singer under the same management which had engaged her for the London season, and that she looked forward eagerly to receiving the one word of praise which would to her excel all others.

"It is so cruelly long since I have seen you, dearest," she wrote. "My voice has improved, I know that, but will you find hardness and mannerisms in me? Oh believe, dear, that there is always the softest of nests in my heart for you, where you lie amid the fair roses you resemble. I know if you have changed it is only to become more lovely and beloved, and I am afraid of nothing except that you will be shocked by the roughness this life has left upon me.

"You will come to New York to visit me? You know I can't get out to S—— for an age after I reach America, and I *can't wait* to see you. You will manage it?"

This letter roused and enlivened Bethesda remarkably. She had grown a little thin and worn of late, but this good news seemed to quite restore her spirits. Every one thought the change would benefit her, and it was decided that she should visit a friend in New York who had long been pressing her to come, and who would take good care of her.

"I would not wish to be with Evra at a hotel," Bethesda said. "She will be in a turmoil, and I shall really visit with her better being somewhere else. Besides, the Downtons would be rightfully offended if I went anywhere rather than to them."

The arrangements were soon made, and Bethesda was to leave with her uncle next day.

"I only wish you were going to be there," said Bethesda to

her sister, with a peculiar yearning. "I don't know how to be away from you any more."

"It will be good for you both to discover," remarked Mrs. Stanhope. "Margaret and the baby shall come over to me while you are gone, and you will come back all the fresher to one another."

"We never needed that, did we, Beth?"

"No, dear; I have no fear of our tiring one another."

Mr. Stanhope's companionship on the journey east was a great relief to his niece, for she shrank with unusual timidity from being alone with the knowledge that René was in America, and probably aware of all her movements. It was really something of a comfort, too, to leave Marcot behind. His presence had become irksome to her, yet she disliked to dismiss him, for he was irreproachable in service and discretion; but she felt she could be less guarded when he was fairly left behind. Perhaps later it would be advisable, not alone on her own account, to send him away altogether.

Guinevere had particularly requested Bethesda not to come down to the dock to meet her. "Come instead to the hotel when you know I have arrived, and once more I shall hold you in my arms and press you to the heart whose love you have known and *touched*."

Bethesda did as she was bidden, had a telegram sent her when the steamer came, and at last started off one snowy afternoon, dressed with especial daintiness, to meet the friend she had not seen since that summer day in London so long ago.

She had sent flowers before her to give the artist a silent welcome, and when she entered the parlour reserved to Mademoiselle Cinoni's use the room was full of fragrance, if empty. In an instant, however, the door was flung open with an impetuosity which brought a smile to Bethesda's lips, and Guinevere, tall, golden-haired, insistent as ever, stood before her, and held her hands, and searched her face, and then took her, furs and all, into a passionate embrace.

"You are my Lily just as you were!" she exclaimed. "Only I had not dreamed you could change so, and still be my own. And I,—would you know me?"

She held Bethesda off, and seized her eyes with a look which was penetrating yet trustful.

"No one could ever mistake you," said Bethesda with

admiring warmth. "Dear Evra ! it is so natural to see you—and yet so strange."

"Ah, yes ; you are thinking of your aunt. True, child. We have gone through much since we were last together, I as well as you. But we can never lose the grasp of one another's hearts which we took, and held, and will hold for ever. Come, love ; let us sit down and give me time to feel I actually have you. No, you sha'n't undo your cloak ; let me. Didn't I use to be your maid ? I haven't forgotten my old ways. Do you remember the bon-bons and the lilies ? Ah, sweet ! it was good of you to send me these. Here are some roses, too, such as you used to like. Not from you ?"

She took up the card lying among them, then glanced sharply at Bethesda. Seeing her unsuspecting face she threw the card immediately aside.

"Well, then, I don't care for them. Here, take this chair by the fire. Now, don't rebel. You know I am well aware of your habit of saying 'No' and 'No,' and I just don't mind it at all ! Here you sit, dear, and here I sit," pulling forward a stool and placing herself quickly at Bethesda's feet. "Ah, now I am happy ! I will just hold your hand, carissima mia, and we will be still. I must realise you."

Bethesda submitted quietly. How familiar it all was, and how fresh and frank this artist's heart had kept during these years of gaslight glare ! One could see the experience in her face, however ; in the faint lines on her forehead, the proud glance of the eyes, the widened nostrils, the decision and haughty indifference of the mouth. The artist was there also stronger than ever ; the intensity, the assured capacity, the power of enthusiasm, were heightened and steadied. Bethesda looked forward to seeing her in some great part with an anticipative thrill.

"Well ?" said Miss Conover, breaking the silence with a full glance upwards, and a closer pressure of the hand. But without waiting for Bethesda to reply, she went on : "I must tell you, dearest, how free and true I feel just here, humbly at your feet. I believe the touch of this little hand has lifted from me the weight of a hundred prisoners' chains. You don't know what my life has been, Beth ; such suspicion, and distrust, and rancour ; and all the time, night and day, having to defend myself, and guard my thoughts not to become bitter and hating

too. And now, here I come to you, I *feel* you, and all the best I have lived, all the glories of my art, and the noble ideals it lends me for a time, filter through into myself, my *me*. You do this, love. Each lineament of your face shows how you and your ideal are one, and helps me to feel mine so too. Some one said that, 'in his hand her soul felt safe and free.' Mine does in yours, Bethesda."

"Dear Evra!" said Bethesda in a deeply touched tone, "it is because you are so true an artist that you feel this. Don't rob yourself to lavish praise on me."

"I don't! Haven't I tried to be just this and failed? I have fought for it, cried for it, prayed for it, and—lost it. Now, with one little touch, in an instant you give it me."

Her head fell into Bethesda's lap, and the hand she loved wandered caressingly and in silence over the soft curls. It spoke too much, however, for Guinevere rose abruptly.

"I can't stand it!" she said in a choked voice, and went swiftly out of the room.

A moment later Mrs. Conover entered, and greeted Bethesda cordially, although she looked anxious.

"What have you been doing to my daughter?" she asked, half smiling. "I have not seen her so overcome in a long time."

"She is tired from the voyage, and the excitement of meeting again has, I think, surprised her into a momentary weakness. She is well? She looks so."

"Oh, very well. She begins rehearsals to-morrow. They are in a great hurry for her to appear. They won't give her much time. It is a disadvantageous arrangement, but she would listen to nothing in her eagerness to come to America. You will be at her *début*? She is not frightened any more as she used to be,—unless you frighten her, my dear. And how is your sister? And poor Mrs. Trescott's baby? We have taken such an interest in everything. Are you quite well yourself now? I believe, my child, the baby has made a little mother of you. You seem like a married woman."

"Do I?" said Bethesda, with a rather sad smile. "Our May-Flower certainly exerts a great influence over us, almost as much as her mother used to, in a different way. I wish you could see her. She does not look at all like Aunt Mabel unfortunately, but she is very winning."

"Oh, I can fancy that, Mrs. Trescott was so charming. But you should just see Vera with a child. A friend of hers had one, and she worshipped it. She used to slip away from the parlour in the evening and go upstairs to sing it to sleep. Sometimes the whole household would crowd around the door to listen ; but she never knew it. I kept that little domestic pleasure for her undisturbed. You can't fancy how she has improved, but you shall hear ! How very good it was of you to strew such sweet praise in her path before she came ! Your name now—— Ah, here she comes."

Guinevere had conquered her emotion, and was during the rest of the interview quite her usual brisk, entertaining, and brilliant self. She had a thousand stories to tell, and told them with admirable spirit. But she would not let Bethesda talk much. Something in the low tones threatened her newly won composure.

As Bethesda was going away she took her in her arms and whispered :

"When you see me again you won't affect me so. Come often, dear ; I need you. If I am out I will leave word for you, and I will run in to you whenever I can catch a minute. Wrap yourself well, sweet. Good-bye."

She said good-bye, but she held her Lily still locked in a close embrace.

"What are you ?" she broke out at last. "Are you here in my arms or not ? I believe I shall find you died a week ago, and this is your spirit come to visit me. Well, go, if you must. But don't vanish entirely. I shall see if you exist to-morrow. You laugh ? It is no laughing matter. Still, I have your card, and we shall see."

Guinevere found her friend in existence the next day, and for many days after, and gradually she became used to her and lost the feeling of insubstantiality which had at first haunted her. However, she did not feel satisfied in regard to her, and groped in the dark, as it were, for the keynote to this elusive harmony.

The name of René d'Isten was for long not mentioned between them. Bethesda had become so unfamiliar to the sound of it that it would have startled her, in spite of the fact that now he was seldom absent from her thoughts. Being away from Margaret and the baby, and all the surroundings of her

new life, and again with comparative strangers and Evra, as she had been in the old days, brought the past continually before her. Even Mrs. Trescott seemed less absent than when her child was present, and except when Bethesda was with the Conovers her life seemed to move among shadows; a feeling that made her look to the long future at times with a half-unconscious dread.

The night that Mademoiselle Cinoni made her *début*, Bethesda felt herself transported bodily to the Pergola in Florence, and, when a voice addressed her, turned almost expecting to see Signor Straora. Yet everything around her was different. The house was an American one, and if crammed was capriciously critical, and timid of applause. As the opera went forward, however, Bethesda forgot herself and her surroundings completely. One in the audience felt it safe for him to keep his glass fixed upon her face, recognising each shade of emotion, yet unafraid of detection.

Mademoiselle Cinoni was at her best, which was superb. The tenor supported her admirably, and the matchless beauty of the opera was rendered with perfection. The house from being cold and hesitating, became quite Italian with enthusiasm. An opera so sung had never before been heard in America, and neither had the applause to which it gave rise. Bethesda was in one of the stage-boxes, and was recognised by some as the authoress whose name had endorsed the singer before them. The fact passed from one to another between the acts, and when she let fall a mass of lilies at her friend's feet, which was immediately caught up with a glance of gratitude, a wave of tribute broke over the house, which was an acknowledgment of both the season's favourites.

In talking the evening over next day, Guinevere said, somewhat abruptly :

"Monsieur d'Isten was there. Did you know he was a marquis now?"

"I had heard of it. When did he lose his father?" asked Bethesda calmly.

"Only a short time ago; about three months now. He was very ill himself after it. The strain had been a long one, for it was soon after your sister telegraphed us you were better that he heard the news of his father. Ah! those were terrible days, dearest! M. d'Isten was quite beside himself when we heard

there was no hope for you. He entertained for you a devotion so pure and unselfish that I think at any time he would have given his life to spare you pain."

Bethesda turned somewhat paler, but she answered steadily :

"Do you think so? Then, Evra, why is he here now?"

"Let him tell you, dear; that is all he desires. Yes, I have seen him; of course I have. We came quite close together, through you, those dreadful weeks in Paris. He wrote to me after you refused to see him in S——. He did not see why you should not trust him. I was glad to be able to tell him I was about to sail for America. I was sure you would let me prevail upon you to meet him, and allow him to explain what he has to tell you. Don't fear him. He is an honourable man. May I tell him he can call on you? or will you meet him here?"

"Neither, Guinevere. How can you ask it of me? It is not right that I should meet him—not under existing circumstances."

"What are 'existing circumstances'?"

"The present ones."

"Ah! dear, don't put me off. Be frank with me. I assure you, I,—and you trust me?—that there is no reason why you should not meet—unless——"

"Well?"

"Unless you are engaged."

Bethesda turned aside abruptly and did not speak.

"I did not mean to hurt you, darling; believe me, I am only working for your happiness; I——"

"Evra, where is Madame d'Isten?"

"Madame d'Isten? I have no idea."

"Enough, Evra; this is a matter no one but I can understand—no one but I should control. You must trust me when I say firmly, and for the last time, that I shall not willingly meet René d'Isten."

"Ah! if you are so determined—— But let me just say this: Have you no thought of what he may understand better than you?—no belief that he should control anything? Bethesda, this is not as it should be; you are not frank with me or with your own heart."

Miss Hamilton raised her eyes slowly to her friend's and let them rest there. A majesty of resignation dominated all desire in them so royally that the artist seized her hands with a cry:

"Do as you think best, my darling, but don't look at me like that! You stab me!"

And Bethesda pressed the contrite hands, and nothing more was said.

CHAPTER XIV.

"Where I found only food
For self-indulgence, you still blew a spark at brood
I' the dullest amber; stopped not till self-sacrifice imbued
Heaven's face with flame."

ROBERT BROWNING

A FEW days later Mademoiselle Cinoni was singing at a *matinée*, from which Bethesda had been detained by company. She escaped, however, late in the afternoon, and went to the hotel to see Guinevere as soon as she should return. The gas was already lighted in the streets as she left her carriage, and twilight made the parlour dim and chill.

"Put on more coal, please," she said to the servant, who by this time knew her well. "Miss Conover will be cold when she comes in. I will wait for her."

"Shall I light the gas, madam?"

"No, thanks; the firelight pleases me."

When he had left the room she laid aside her hat and cloak, bent to see if the *jacqueminot* roses at her belt were crushed, and then went towards the grate slowly, pressing her hands together as if she were in pain. Her face, distinct in the half glow, half gloom, was sad. The curves of her lips denoted a renunciation that was made not without sorrow, and her eyes shone with unshed tears.

She stood a few moments on the hearth in her gray close-clinging dress, her mien one of lassitude and depression. Then she moved, with a faintly-indicated gesture of shifting a burden, and slowly seated herself.

The next instant the hand she had allowed to drop over the arm of her chair was seized and held and kissed again and again. Some one knelt beside her with bowed head, murmuring, in broken syllables:

"Esda! My beloved Esda! My Béthesda!"

The passive fingers grew icy under his lips before he dared look up. The chill silence shocked him. What had happened?

Her face was ashen ; her eyes closed. He sprang to his feet in alarm.

"Leave me !" she said then faintly.

He went away at once ; not out of the room, but to the window at the end of it, and stood there indecisive.

What should he do ? If he left her now, his last chance was gone, and if he stayed he might kill her before she learned what he meant. But he could not give her up ! He must discover what this meant, this coldness and suffering—the one so apparent, the other intentionally concealed.

Gradually he turned so as to be able to see her without seeming to do so. She was recovering ; she was sitting upright now, her hand to her heart. Suspense was worse than death to them both. He went swiftly to her side.

"Béthesda," he said, "I have no wife. Be mine."

He waited for some response, but she gave him none. She was gathering the strength she knew she must command, in long stifled breaths.

At last he went and knelt before her, where the full light from the fire could strike his face.

"Esda," he pleaded, "I beseech you to look at me. Read in my face what you can. I have nothing to fear, and once it was an open book to you as was my soul."

"Hush !"

"I cannot longer be silent !" he exclaimed passionately. "I have waited and waited for you to trust me. I must exculpate myself. I beg your forgiveness for having forced my way into your presence. If your heart does not intercede for me after these years of thirst I will not attempt it. I have not time. Listen, Béthesda ; look at me and tell me, are you afraid of my deceiving you—you who are omnipresent, omnipotent with me ? I have obeyed you with unwavering persistence for two whole years. I have done with joy all you told me, because it was your wish. And, Béthesda, I have had during the darkest times a sure faith that Heaven would reward us. God gives it to you, Esda, to be my heaven on earth ; you cannot refuse ! Why would you not see me ? You knew I would not have come to you until I was free, and could claim you before all the world as my own. You are mine ; you cannot deny it. You are killing yourself in trying to deny it. Beloved, take what God offers you and share it with me.

Let us enjoy life purely. God offers it to us, Béthesda; we must not refuse."

In spite of his ardent words he had not dared move towards her. Something held him away. He felt her far off, as if the remorseless ocean rolled its waves between them still.

"René, you have spoken, let me speak." Her voice, faint at first, grew clearer as she proceeded. "Once you overcame all my scruples, one by one. I have been taught my weakness and your power, and I have not come to this moment unprepared. You must understand that I am firm when I say I can never marry you."

"Béthesda!"

"Hush, you must hear me now. Think how we tempted one another away from our allegiance to right, to duty, and you will see——"

"You never 'tempted' me," burst out René irrepressibly, "unless it were to purity and fidelity. You put your hand on me and said: Be faithful to Louise, and I obeyed you. But now all my allegiance to her is severed. I never was hers, and I now, heart and soul, am yours. It is to you alone I owe fealty."

"You owe no fealty to me, my friend,—that is another error into which we fell. It is not to persons so much that we owe duties as to ourselves and to God. Your conscience is too precious a charge to give to any one but him. That was where I injured you before."

"As if you ever injured me! I would leave it with the good God to-day to declare if I am not a better man than when I met you; ay, Béthesda, a better man." And Bethesda, recognising the stronger manhood in him, could not disbelieve it. "When I look towards God, beloved, I cannot help seeing you, because you are above me, and nearer him. Do not shrink, Béthesda, for I speak reverently. I found the tenderness and pity of God during your illness when he answered my prayers and made you well. The weight of my conscience shall never rest again upon you, I promise you; but my conscience, yes, God himself, who is love, tells me to claim you, to make you mine. I am free. I am free, Béthesda; you cannot put me back in those chains which weighed on my soul and your tender heart. Beloved, you *cannot* refuse me. I hold your heart, come to me and let us be at rest."

He held out his arms towards her with an eloquent appeal, but she shrank into her chair, and clenched her hands tight.

"Ma bien aimée!" exclaimed René, a newly aroused anxiety in his voice: "Thou dost love me? Thou wilt not be obdurate? Thou wilt not condemn one who loves each breath thou drawest, to exile from thee? See, Esda; my father is no more; nothing longer binds me to Europe. I will come to America, and live where thou desirest. Anything, so that we are together. Thou must, love. Thy fragile life cannot bear this strain. Thy petals, my rose, are closing over the grief which consumes thee. Let me snatch it from thee, dearest, and fill thy heart with rejoicing. I can, for thou lovest me."

Bethesda could not speak, but made a negative sign.

"Thou dost not love me?" exclaimed René, seizing her hand. "Thou canst not say it! Each touch of these slender fingers betrays thee! Thou dost love me! thou wilt always love me. I hold thy heart; I shall never let it go, so help me God." Then his voice suddenly fell to low, persuasive accents: "Give me this hand, Bethesda. It is small; it is kind. Since I have the wealth of thy heart, add this little, dear hand. It will lose thee nothing; it will give me all. Silent still? Ah, God! was ever grief like this! To see her dying, and feel my very vitals gnawed with hunger to save her, and she refuses me! Esda, Bethesda, it shall not be! Thou canst not do this thing, for I will not let thee. If thou didst not love me I would not complain, but now—— Feel my heart! its throbs are each a tribute to you. You have my life in your hands. Do not spill the warm blood that would pour itself into your veins to nourish you. I cannot live longer without thee, Bethesda! I will follow thee about the world; I will renounce all else to wait upon thee, thy shadow not closer nor more persistent. And to my importunity thou wilt yield what thou wilt not to my love! Bethesda, *ma toute aimée*, look upon thy servant and kill him not!"

He flung himself at her knees, and buried his face in his hands. A new strength, not her own, seemed to enter into Bethesda's anguished heart.

"René, look at me," she said. He lifted grief-stricken eyes to hers. "Tell me; if—if I married you and should die, would you not feel your life sacred to me?"

"In death as in life," said René solemnly.

"Then it is your duty to feel the same, to act at least the same, to Louise. Love only makes duty passionately present, and as long as your body is one with your soul, you and your wife are one flesh."

René rose in bewilderment.

"You do not mean that simply because I have been married you would not marry me, even if Louise were dead? No, no, Béthesda, that would be folly."

"'Even if she were,' quoted Bethesda wonderingly. "Does she still live? Did you not say she died last spring?"

She was looking at him piercingly now, and under her eyes his fell.

"I lost her then, yes," said René, feeling an irresistible sense of equivocation before this clear soul.

But she had been shocked into an acute consciousness of—was it concealment or duplicity?—in him. It wrung her heart, but it severed her from him, and made her keen after the truth. She rose, struck a match, and lit the drop-light, then turned to him with a grave authority.

"Tell me about it," she said simply. "How did she die? What caused her death?"

René looked at her and down again, aground for a moment, but he made his decision, and floated free quickly.

"It is a sad story, my Béthesda," he said, with a gesture of merciful withholding. "Do not let us speak of it now. Let it suffice that I assure you solemnly I am free,—free absolutely, by law, by heart, and by intent."

"But I must know," said Bethesda, looking at him with clear, commanding eyes. "You used to say you spoke freely to me; do so now, this once more, René, for I ought to know."

René felt her supremacy, and his habit of giving obedience where he gave confidence reasserted itself in an unlooked-for manner. But, if she knew the truth, his cause would be lost. No, why should it? On the contrary it might vanquish that uncomprehended notion of hers to find that he had never been married. And was not love the true marriage? He had often heard her say so.

"Listen then, since you insist," he began. "I desire nothing so much as to lay my whole life in your hands. I would have spared you what cannot help but pain your large

heart, for it means suffering to another, but as always I obey you. Louise was never my wife."

"Never your wife!" repeated Bethesda in low tones of dismay.

"No; the marriage was illegal. We neither of us suspected it for years, but her lover proved it to me not long ago. She never was other than Louise Mandéras." And then he told her of the law forbidding the intermarriage of French and foreigners on foreign soil. "But we could arrange that. You could go with your aunt to France, and there——"

"Hush! How can you speak of marriage to me, to any one but Louise!" She sat erect in her chair, as though it were the throne of judgment. "Your whole honour binds you to her. She is your wife before God; man's laws are insignificant beside those divine ones. You cannot help but marry her."

"But, chère Béthesda, listen. Is not love a divine law? Louise never loved me, nor I her. She married me, as we thought, loving another. She did wrong; I know you think so. Would you, then, have me commit the same sin?"

"I would not have you commit the sin of deserting a woman who had intrusted her honour, her life, to your hands, no matter what her feelings. To act you must judge by acts. You are her husband. You should not have let a day pass before you acknowledged her lawfully as such. She knows nothing of it, you say? But think how cruel would be her fate did chance let her know. Oh, hasten back and marry her at once! Do not linger an unnecessary hour."

"If she refused me, and preferred to marry one whom she has long loved, what then, Béthesda?" he said, with slow significance. "And she has often wished to be free from me; we both know that."

Bethesda flinched a moment before this possibility, but recovered herself at once.

"Then show her how wrong it would be," she answered promptly. "Plead with her; point out to her how no man could respect her did she choose, wilfully choose, to stigmatise her past with dishonour; less than any other, a person who has acted as that man has. How evil must have been his aim to have proven this technicality to you! No, no, she would not so malign herself as to choose him rather than you; she could not; by my woman's heart, I know it!"

"Ah, that heart, Béthesda ! it is mine. I will not give it up."

"It is not yours, René d'Isten," and Bethesda drew herself up superbly. "My heart is no man's who could leave any deed undone to repair an irreparable loss, not only to the woman he has called wife but to himself. Oh, it is the cruellest of my punishments that I should be the object to stand between you and the performance of your most manifest duty ! René, my respect even cannot be yours unless you return instantly to France and marry Louise. I could never forgive myself, never forgive you, if our acquaintance should thus degrade you."

"That is morbidness, folly !" exclaimed René, almost angrily. "Your morality is warped, Béthesda, by thinking on this subject so near your heart. Is not love the real marriage ? And I never loved Louise, nor she me. Two years ago when you bade me renounce you, you were a saint. It was the crucifixion of your heart and of mine, but you did right. Even in the bitterest moments I acknowledged this. Now I say you are wrong. You sacrifice your happiness and mine ; your health, my sanity perhaps, to a fanciful duty, a morbid sense of honour. I have given eight years of my life to Louise without succeeding in winning her love. Let that suffice. I will do what is right by her, but——"

"But nothing else than marriage can even mitigate this terrible evil, René. 'A fanciful duty' ? No duty could be more imperative. What ! You would be 'unlike other men' and yet live eight years before the world as a husband, and then refuse to marry the woman you called wife ? You would be the truly chivalrous man, and leave a woman to ignominy who had borne your name ? You cannot do it, René ; it is not in you. You will marry her because it is right, because you owe it to God to redeem an innocent mistake, or else it becomes a most guilty one. If it is a sacrifice, look upon it as a proof of repentance for the wrong we have done. It will be accepted as such, and only such a one can be accepted, for it alone can undo the wrong. Trust me, René."

He was silent a few moments, overcome against his will by her words and tone.

"Beloved, how can I trust you," he said at last, "when I feel that this is overleaping the limits of morality, and that in an endeavour which robs me of you, it is killing you. Ah !

dearest, trust me once. Love is the sovereign who dictates laws, who seizes our hearts and gives us no liberty but in obeying his commands. Come to me, fear not. It is what men have done always; it is what every law sanctions. Besides, dearest, it is your life; it is my life. Come."

She had grown paler and paler as he spoke, and her hand was pressed to her side. René thought he felt a wavering in her mind, and tried to take her hand, kneeling beside her. But she motioned him away.

"No," she said faintly, "this—this hurts deep. It stabs me, René, to have such words addressed to me by one who, before God and my soul, owes himself to another. This proves how unlike we are. We are no longer one in thought and feeling; we are grievously separated, more than ever before. Go, René. I don't wish to see you any more."

"But you love me, Béthesda," said René, with deep reproach.

"I did love you; you knew that; it was wrong. Because it was wrong I have striven to overcome it. I need strive no longer, for you have killed it now. You need not snatch my hand; I am not a girl to be swept off my feet, and—and—that I should live to say it!—your touch makes me shudder."

René dropped her hand, and stepped back as if struck. The recoil of his own act hurt him too, and deeply.

Presently Bethesda raised her head and the faint colour came back to her lips and cheeks.

"But I cannot believe it," she said. "It is only because you do not see it right. Look at it in this way, René. If I were to marry you here, and you discovered that the marriage was illegal, what would you do then?"

"Take you at once to France, and marry you there."

"Then how can you doubt that this is your duty to Louise? What you would do for me because you care for me, do for her because it is right. If it is hard, do it the more gladly because it shows you grieve for past faults. Show that you are stronger for temptations resisted, by doing this deed."

"It would never have occurred to me two years ago as a duty, Béthesda, and now—I confess I was in doubt, just at first."

"Ah, you see! I knew there must be something there if I could only reach it. You will go to her? You will persuade

her? You do not yourself think there could be any danger of her choosing any one but you? She feels differently towards you than she did?—I knew it! I am convinced you will both yet be happy. Go to her; show her the position, for she must see to understand. Make her acknowledge that she prefers you, and oh, René, would I not be glad!”

Her face was radiant now, and her eyes starry. René looked at the transformation in amazement.

“And would you have nothing to regret?” he said slowly.

“Regret? I? No, indeed! A moment ago I thought I had lost you really, vitally; that you were ignoble. I see now you were but trying me. But if you can accomplish an harmonious union between yourself and your wife you will give me the keenest happiness. I feel a great weight lifted from me, for I believe it is possible, and that you will not fail. I am sure you will not. A steamer sails to-morrow, some friends of mine go by it; go too, and telegraph me when she has acknowledged her affection for you and you are really married. That shall be the last word between us, and what a good word!—You will?”

There was a little silence, while Bethesda's eyes seemed to seize his very soul and hold it to her high purpose. Then:

“I never disobeyed you yet,” he said. “I shall not now. I will do my best.

“Ah, my true Béthesda!” he exclaimed presently, recognising that he had won his own highest approval in winning hers. “Each time I approach you I see a new height of truth. You have cured me of one evil after another ever since the pool of your heart was first stirred for me.”

“No, it is only Christ who can do that,” she answered softly. “He bids you drop the burden of the past and go forward in a new life, free. He will bless you in it, René; go.”

CHAPTER XV.

“Through love to light ! Oh wonderful the way,
That leads from darkness to the perfect day !
From darkness and from dolor of the night,
To morning that comes singing o’er the sea.
Through love to light ! through light, O God, to Thee
Who art the love of love, the eternal light of light !”

R. W. GILDER.

SEVERAL years later René d'Isten, with Louise upon his arm, was going through the Parisian Salon on the Artist's Day before the grand opening. He was glancing at the pictures a little carelessly, more occupied with the memories of seven years ago, when he had come here with Bethesda and Mrs. Trescott, than with what surrounded him, although he did not fail in delicate attentions to his wife.

His face showed the time and experience that had passed, yet with all its *recueillement* it was not sad. There was a compact force of character, a unity of purpose, a continual surety of uprightness, which gave new dignity to his features, and made each line a mark of honour. If his life was much in the past, the present was unusually full of large aims and noble endeavour, and the toying with life which had once been a delight to him had now given place to earnest work. At the present moment, however, he was for a rarity dreaming.

Louise had changed much more markedly than René. There was a content and self-control in her face never seen there previously, and her eyes were often turned with solicitous tenderness to her husband's face. She frequently thought in recurring to that stormy scene five years ago, when she had heard of his devotion, her lover's perfidy, and the *Américaine's* nobility, that some good power had guided her to choose that better part which should not be taken from her. Her husband was ever near to uphold and guide her, and she was quite willing that he should dream occasionally, for it proved his freedom in her presence. She knew that she was never irksome to him now.

The people round them meantime were neither dreaming nor pondering. They were all extremely interested in the exhibition. Picturesque men with eccentric manners, and “artist” written on each article of their dress ; women with more brains

—of a kind—and less timidity than ordinary womanhood possesses ; scattered members of the *haute-volée* amusing themselves with the scene ; all thronged through the rooms together, examining, criticising, and babbling. Every one seemed to tend with a rather remarkable unanimity to the central apartment where the prize picture hung. The d'Istens drifted with the rest, hearing indifferently the remarks of this or that one near them.

"It is by an Italian," said one.

"'The Answer to the Sphinx!'" laughed another, turning the leaves of a catalogue. "What a name!"

"More of a mystery than the question," sneered a third.

"Oh, mon Dieu, these Italians!" cried a brilliantly-dressed woman. "What ideas they do have, there in the land of the Beatrice! I demand it of you, messieurs, did such a woman as this 'Answer' ever live?"

"Ma foi! not in Paris."

"Does she look Italian, then?" asked the woman triumphantly, "Gold-brown hair, and eyes of—— Well, you shall tell me what shade they are. The prize, indeed! The man does not know how to mix his colours."

Here they reached the threshold of the centre room, and suddenly all the chatter fell away from René d'Isten's hearing as if he had been lifted to another region by one sweep of a powerful wing. Before him was the almost breathing form of Béthesda Hamilton.

She stood, dressed in the warm white she loved, her head turned a little upwards, as if she had but just let her eyes fall from some great vision, to meet, and hold, and exalt, the sight of those who looked upon her.

When one could leave the eyes for a moment, one noticed the brows, serene in spite of their capacity for suffering ; the exquisite contour from forehead to chin, and the willing resignation of the mouth, which made it truly joyous.

It was a face beyond compare, and it was a faultless painting. Louise had seen photographs of Béthesda, and she recognised the face, and admitted its supremacy. She tightened her clasp a little, unconsciously, on her husband's arm, as they stood beneath the gaze which met and held them both above all earthly strife. This was the woman he had left to come to her and retrieve her from dishonour. A deep humility over-

spread her face. She looked up at René. He was wrapped in an exalted enthusiasm. The painting made alive to him Béthesda's books which came year after year and laid their treasures wide before him. It reinvigorated his noblest aims and truest endeavours. He turned to his wife and pressed her hand against his side.

"She needs no mortals," he said. "Long since I called her a saint. She is that. No one can touch her. She is above us all, and she smiles down on our union, my Louise. Thus did she look when she told me her keenest happiness would be in seeing us truly united. She sees us now."

Louise's eyes were swimming in tears at the tenderness of his tone. All the bitterness of jealousy was replaced by this sweetness. She clung to him a moment with both hands.

A laugh, a Parisian laugh, low and keen, startled them.

"Why do they paint impossibilities?" queried a languid voice. "I find angels much too unreal for me. Some lover's vision? Of course! How silly they are!" and another laugh rounded the mocking sentence to completeness.

It turned all René d'Isten's thoughts into a new channel. For a moment he was madly jealous of the man who had access to Béthesda sufficiently to paint this. A man who loved her too, that was clear. Only a lover could see her like this, and reproduce her—for the Parisian world to scoff at! Faugh! that was no love! The fellow had no sense of decency even!

Yet, as he looked up again, she seemed so unapproachable, though speaking to each one, and taintless as Goethe's angels throwing the flowers of love into hell, that he could not feel her sullied; not as he would have done had that other jasmine-faced picture hung here, questioning and wistful.

Now all her questions were answered. *She knew.*

A half-hour later René d'Isten turned and asked some one beside him who was the artist.

"Monsieur Straora, an Italian," was the reply.

"Can you tell me where I might find him?"

"He stands there, monsieur."

The marquis looked and saw the Florentine painter absorbed in contemplation of his work.

"Let us speak to him, Louise, if you do not object?" he said.

"Certainly not."

A few steps brought René and his wife to Signor Straora's side.

"Monsieur Straora, I believe? Pray allow me to give you my card and claim acquaintance through one I have often heard mention you, and whom you have now placed before us so beautifully. Madame d'Isten, Monsieur Straora."

The artist bowed, and answered courteously:

"I am much pleased to meet you, Monsieur le Marquis. When I last had the pleasure of seeing Miss Hamilton, she had recently received a letter, I think, from Madame d'Isten. It seemed to give her great satisfaction."

"Not sufficient for her to answer it," said Louise, smiling. "But I trust she is well?"

"Quite well, for her; at least she was a month ago. She is delicate, but you see her works? You know then how indefatigably busy she must be."

"And is she really so beautiful as you depict her, monsieur?"

The artist smiled as he glanced at his work, but sobered in so doing.

"I wish you might meet her, madame, to see how little I have done her justice."

"I wish I might, indeed; but since she does not even respond to my letters, will you not call upon us and tell us about her? I confess I have great curiosity in regard to a woman who is so exquisite, and yet occupies herself only with work, and the care of another's child—which was her life when we last heard of her, was it not, Monsieur d'Isten?"

"Her whole interest, I believe," said René; "but that would not be apt to last."

"I see no signs of its changing," replied Signor Straora quietly. "She is more than content; she is happy. One could not wish her life to change," and an involuntary sigh escaped him.

"Is the destiny of your painting fixed?" asked René presently.

"Yes; it is not for sale. I shall have it taken to Italy when the Exhibition is over. I see you have both gone to the heart of my subject. Few in Paris will, but it shall hang here for a while to teach the city what a woman may be."

The three stood silent for some time, while the eyes above took possession of their souls and led them into the regions of

peace. René had recognised that the artist's admiration of his subject, though exalted, was impersonal, and he guessed the cause. Béthesda, as he had said, needed no mortals. And Louise could have no jealousy, for she felt herself closer to her husband now than this woman could be.

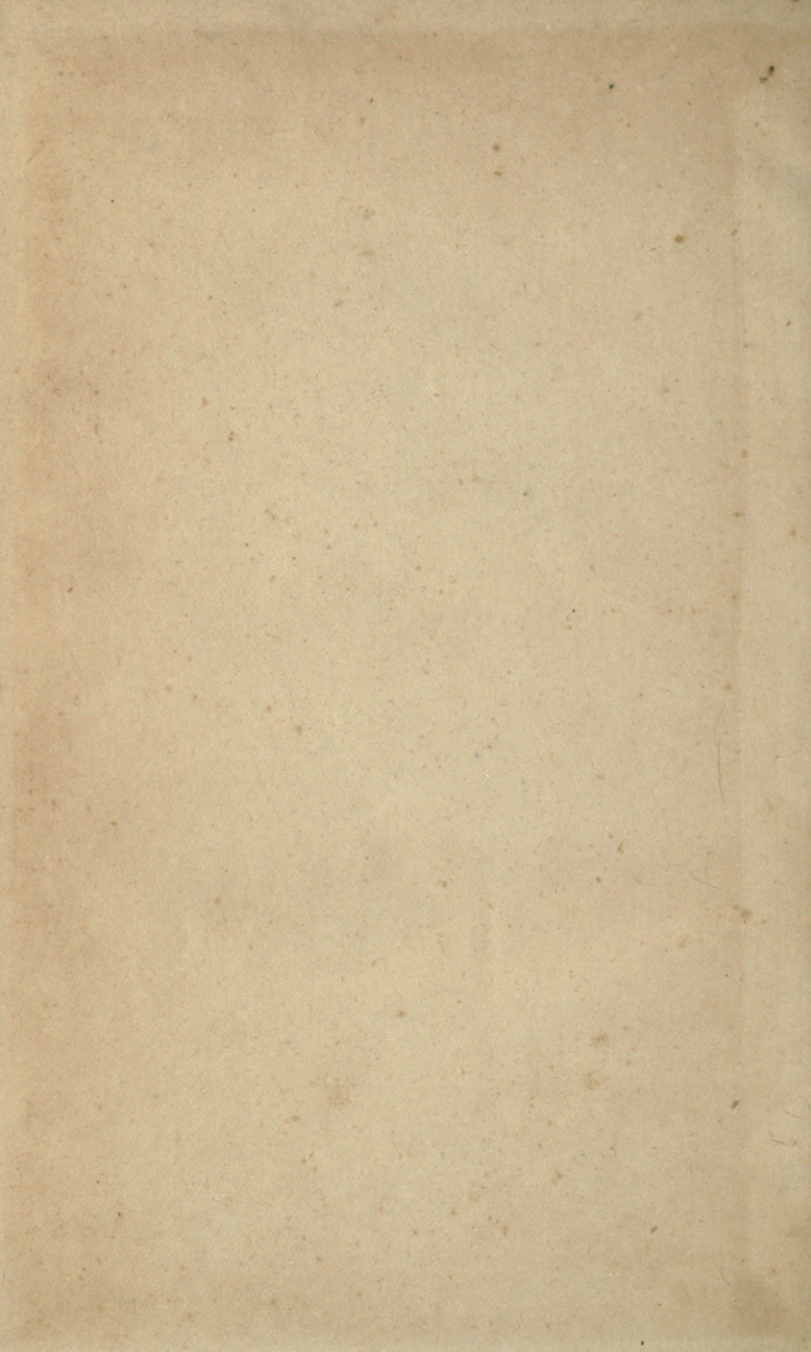
But some deep and uncomprehended feeling brought the tears to her eyes. René saw them.

"My wife," he bent to say, "she gave you to me gladly, and I thank her."

As Monsieur and Madame d'Isten turned away after securing the promise of a speedy call from Signor Straora, they heard their new friend mutter to himself, still studying the picture :

"And yet it is not like, it is not like."

THE END.



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